
Wrestling Observer Newsletter

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SAM MUCHNICK & THE NWA

MAY 10, 1993

Sam Muchnick, the last survivor from the original 1948 meeting which formed the National Wrestling Alliance and president of the organization during much of its heyday, underwent open heart surgery on 4/27 and remains hospitalized at press time in stable condition. Muchnick, 87, who promoted wrestling in St. Louis from 1943 through his retirement in 1982, and NWA president for more than two decades, was complaining of chest pains over the weekend and failed a stress test and doctors ordered an operation. He was found with 90 to 95 percent blockage in three arteries and 100 percent blockage in three others. The operation was said to have gone very well and he's expected to be out of the hospital toward the end of this week. Muchnick was for many years considered within the industry as the top promoter in the United States and along with Paul Boesch as the fairest payoff man. A roast had been planned in St. Louis for this coming weekend for Muchnick by Mike Lano and it hasn't been canceled. The roast, and things leading up to it, is a bizarre story in and of itself. Several major names in the industry including Lou Thesz, Nick Bockwinkel and Ted DiBiase are scheduled to appear and from our information will be there as will other major names. The roast, however, has been plagued by so much deception and dishonesty in its advertising, perhaps more in what was said to those asked to come as much as deception to the readers of the wrestling newsletters that plugged the event. So many names were listed as "invited" or even written up as coming unless there was a last-minute emergency before many had even been spoken with, let alone if there was even a remote chance of them coming. Some of the names listed as part of the organizing committee knew nothing of it until hearing from third parties their names were listed.

MAY 17, 1993

Several big names from the past and present were at the Sam Muchnick tribute week in St. Louis. Among the names attended were Lou Thesz, Red Bastien, Tiger Conway Jr. & Sr., Al Costello, Rip Hawk, Killer Kowalski, Ox Baker, Ivan & Vladimir Koloff, Bob Orton, Juanita Wright (Sapphire), Bob Backlund, Kimala, Brooklyn Brawler, Blackjack Lanza, Sabu, Ted DiBiase, IRS, Steve Keirn, Bob Roop, Pepper Martin and Ernie Ladd. Muchnick was unable to attend because he was still recovering from open heart surgery but had family present.

MAY 24, 1993

MUCHNICK CONVENTION

We are writing to you from the Sam Muchnick convention in St. Louis. We are all having a fabulous time talking and mingling with the wrestlers, fans and each other. Dozens of wrestlers from Lou Thesz, Tiger Conway Sr., Killer Kowalski, Al Costello to current wrestlers including Bob Backlund, Ted DiBiase, Bob Orton, Sabu, Lanny Poffo and many more have been at the convention. This is an open, relaxed and collegial atmosphere that is unique among wrestling conventions. Dr. Mike Lano did a spectacular job almost single-handedly in pulling this off. Sam Muchnick, just out of open heart surgery, spoke via phone hookup. We are all pleased at the way this convention is proceeding and grateful to Dr. Mike Lano for his efforts and sacrifices. We are also quite upset that you ran no report of this convention in the newsletter, depriving other fans across the country of the chance to

find out about it and even come as we did. You are supposed to be an independent journalist and you failed to inform people of what has clearly turned out to be a successful, historic event. We therefore hope in the future you will return to a more objective and journalistic approach and properly report on this event in future issues.

Letter had 19 signatures

DM: If anyone who signed this letter wishes to discuss this matter, please call me. To give adequate background on this would take up far too much space. In a nutshell, I received far too many complaints in regard to misleading advertising and misrepresentation going on involved with it to be able to give publicity to the event without devoting considerable space to these complaints. I'm happy that most people who contacted me had a good time although there were some who contacted me that were unhappy with how things turned out but they were the minority and that Lano didn't lose any money on the event.

JANUARY 11, 1999

With the recent popularity boom of pro wrestling, there have been many attempts at writing histories. In most of them, in listing the most important people who have shaped this industry, there has been a notable omission.

The honest wrestling promoter. The one respected so much by the local press that he was an institution in the community and that while they may have questioned the credibility of the shows he produced, nobody ever questioned his credibility. The one respected so much by the wrestlers that not only was anything bad almost never written about him, very little bad was even said about him. The one where the man he battled with the most, at the end said, "All you have to do is tell the truth and he's going to look good." A promoter where there were no stories about reporting fake lower numbers on the house, cheating wrestlers on pay, not paying bills on time or even promises broken.

Of course, in a business as cutthroat as pro wrestling, if such a man were to exist, and there have been some that have tried, once they got to the big scale, they'd be eaten up and chewed out of the business as quick as the thieves could go through their bankroll, as has happened on numerous occasions.

And then there was Sam Muchnick.

Muchnick was the most powerful man in the pro wrestling industry for a longer period of time than any single individual that ever lived. He never held a world championship, although he was the man responsible for creating almost every world champion for a quarter-century. He never had a national television outlet. He never even really ran a wrestling territory. But he was the main force behind the creation of the National Wrestling Alliance, the largest cartel of wrestling promoters that ever existed with members not only throughout most of the United States but in numerous foreign countries as well, and the dominant organization in the industry from 1949 until 1983, and held it together during its glory years. He made St. Louis into the wrestling capital of the world and the most consistent money-making city in the country for nearly a 40-year period. He did that by very simple concepts. He presented pro wrestling as if it were sport. He had a background as a sportswriter, and was friends with many of the leading sports figures of the time. If they could lose games clean, there was no reason wrestlers couldn't. You win some. You lose some. Anything that threatened his product's credibility, threatened his credibility, and because he moved with the high rollers, politicians, social elite and mobsters of the town, he wasn't going to allow anything that would

threaten his standing or by having people around town saying that they went to his show and got screwed or laughing about something silly he was presenting. Because of that, St. Louis pro wrestling had its own brand of absolute logical and weird version of almost total credibility in a very incredible business. When a wrestler made it to the top in St. Louis, they weren't just a star in one city, they became a star everywhere they went. And stars weren't a flavor of the month. Wrestling had its history and legacy in the town. If you were once a star, you would always be treated as a star. Every time you returned, you were still a star. While today's fans often forget matches a day or two after they take place, those fans remembered matches, sometimes for decades. Some older fans still talk about the Bruiser vs. Von Erich death match, and that was in 1964, or the Thesz vs. O'Connor classic, back in 1965, or when Dory Funk Jr. had his first 60:00 draw with Jack Brisco, on New Years Day of 1971. If a star lost to a newcomer, well, that just meant in one fell swoop, the fans knew they were seeing the birth of a new star that they were going to see on top for the next decade or two. It wasn't a fluke, to be forgotten two weeks later. It was a form of pro wrestling completely different than is found today, although the promotional concepts are in some ways similar to today's All Japan Pro Wrestling.

As the years went by and he was replaced as President, that spelled the beginning of the slow crumbling of the most powerful organization of promoters in the history of this business, although it still existed on a big-time name basis through the early 90s, and exists in name only as a consortium of small independent promoters today. But even though Muchnick is probably one of the ten most influential figures in the history of this industry, most histories of wrestling ignore Muchnick's contributions and instead focus on the more flamboyant men who have shaped the sport, from Frank Gotch to The Gold Dust Trio to Jim Londos to Gorgeous George and Lou Thesz, right past the 60s and 70s as if they never took place to Vince McMahon and Hulk Hogan of today. Focusing on Muchnick ruins a lot of charming history pieces. Because the key is that fans weren't going as fun and games, and fans flocked to his shows to see something that was neither a silly spectacle nor a Cowboys and Indians melodrama. They were going to see real athletes compete in something very physical, that looked to be, but in the end definitely was not, real sport. Today in wrestling, the only known Muchnick to wrestling fans is Phil Mushnick.

Muchnick passed away at the age of 93 in the early morning of 12/30 from internal bleeding at St John's Mercy Medical Center in St. Louis after being in bad health most of the past year. To the wrestlers that worked for him, he, along with the late Paul Boesch, and perhaps Don Owen, were generally considered the most respected promoters, known for being fair on their payoffs and not making promises that they couldn't, or knew they wouldn't keep.

Witness this story. In the late 50s, Muchnick had a show booked and the local electricians went out on strike the day of the card. He had to cancel the show. Since virtually all the wrestlers had come in from other territories for the booking and were expecting a good payday, Muchnick paid them their trans and what would have been considered a fair payoff in cash for that market since he recognized it wasn't their fault the show didn't take place. That in and of itself would have been a unique story. A little while later, after a closed-door meeting, Hans Schmidt, one of the headliners at the time, came back with all the money in hand. He told Muchnick that none of the wrestlers would accept any money, not even the trans. He told Muchnick they recognized the show being canceled was out of his control, and that in the past he had always been fair to them, and they had full confidence in the future he would always be fair to them.

How strong was the loyalty of the top wrestlers to him? Think about this. Muchnick started promoting in St. Louis in 1942, and ran his final show 40 years later. In between, he probably ran about 700 major house shows in St. Louis, at either the Arena (often called the Checkerdom), or mainly at the company's home base, Kiel Auditorium. In that entire period, only two main events were ever changed from what was originally advertised on television (with the exception of a few matches where, to protect the business' credibility, he'd advertise the world champion at the time on television, and if the title was going to change hands in the interim, it was actually the new champion that would take over the date so the fans would still get the

title match as advertised). Once, in 1962, Buddy Rogers was scheduled to defend the world title against Cowboy Bob Ellis, but about a week before the show, Rogers was injured in the famous dressing room incident in Columbus, OH with Karl Gotch and Bill Miller. Muchnick couldn't produce the title match, but spent the final week before the show getting the word out to all local media that Rogers wouldn't be there, and there wouldn't be a world title match, but that he was bringing back Lou Thesz, the city's all-time wrestling legend, in as a replacement. The other, on March 16, 1973, was a show headlined by Terry Funk vs. Johnny Valentine for the Missouri State title, which had its own story. A day or two before the show, Valentine went down with a heart attack. Muchnick spent the next day alerting everyone in the media that Valentine wouldn't be there, although to protect Valentine in the city, he hedged and just said it was a heart blockage (and it was extremely rare for Muchnick to not tell the truth to the media which is why his credibility was never questioned on issues like this; a few years earlier Muchnick had problems because when Greg Valentine came in early in his career, Johnny insisted he be billed as his younger brother instead of his son because he didn't want fans to see him as old, and Muchnick, reluctantly, told the lie in that case and felt bad in doing so, as once Johnny retired, he always then billed Greg as his son). He got Gene Kiniski, a former world champion and top draw in the market for a decade, in from Canada as the replacement. Today in WWF and WCW, it is rare for a show to take place as advertised and without at least a few main eventers missing for various reasons. And Muchnick never ran his own territory, so his main eventers were stars being brought in from other parts of the country, and it isn't as if wrestlers didn't get hurt in those days (although the injury rate was lower) and all forms of travel were a lot harder in his early years of promoting, and even in his later years, it isn't as if airports didn't get closed during bad winter snowstorms. Muchnick drew such huge crowds in inclement weather that it was once joked after he drew a big house on November 22, 1963, the night John F. Kennedy was shot, that if there was a nuclear bomb threat in town, he'd still draw 8,000 fans.

The wrestlers of that era knew they had to make it. If a flight was canceled, you took a different flight to another city like Memphis or Kansas City, you rented a car and drove four to six hours, or more, in. If you couldn't make it until 10 or 11 p.m., the show would run long. There were instances of main event wrestlers arriving in the building at 10 p.m. or later and rushing into the ring with no preparation, but no stories of main eventers not making the show due to travel or weather foul-ups. Dory Funk Jr. remembered that early in his career, he was supposed to be in St. Louis but the weather was miserable and there was a possibility the St. Louis Airport would be shut the next day. His father impressed upon him that you don't miss St. Louis, and if there was a chance of bad weather the next day, he was told to get on a train the day before from Amarillo to St. Louis.

Why did this happen? Partially, of course, was the money. Muchnick paid 32% of the after-tax gross to talent. There were hotter cities at various times, but consistently with the exception of 1955-58 when there was no local television, with the exception of Madison Square Garden, which ran less often and paid 16% to 18% to the wrestlers but generally had much bigger grosses, St. Louis was the best drawing market in the country as from World War II on. With one exception, they never had what could be called down periods in a business legendary for its big ups and big downs. Over a nearly 40 year period, Muchnick averaged about 8,000 paid attendance per show, generally running at Kiel Auditorium, which had a capacity of 10,700. He ran, like clockwork, just about every other Friday night, generally with the champion defending on alternate shows, and then took the summer off, because when he started baseball was such a big deal in the city and later just because that's how he did things, at which time the local TV station would air tapes of TV shows from Florida, Georgia and other NWA offices, to give exposure to new wrestlers that would be brought in during the fall season. The main event, which was usually a singles match, got 16%, which in the cases of most world title matches or singles main events meant 8% to both champion and challenger, which in those days were generally \$3,000 payoffs, huge money by the standards of the time. In the case of a tag team match, or a double main event, the participants usually would get 4% each (unless the world champ was on the card who would always get 8%). Undercard money was better than wrestlers would get in most places, although

not unusually high because Muchnick built shows around his main event and believed it was the main event match that is what determined whether he was going to draw a good house or not. At the end of the night, wrestlers would get all the financial breakdowns of the show on a piece of paper, and their percentage, in cash as late as the late 70s, before they left the building. Nobody ever questioned its accuracy, nor should they have. Larry Matysik, the television announcer in the 70s and early 80s who was Muchnick's right-hand man in the office, was there for the money settlements and noted, "I was there. Sam was always perfect on the money. In the office, if a bill came by mail at 10 a.m., he had the check written and it back in the mail by noon." Partially, for main eventers, they knew being a headliner in St. Louis generally meant you'd be a headliner any territory you went to. And there was no way to be world champion unless you could draw as a headliner in St. Louis.

Muchnick was born in the Ukraine on August 22, 1905 and his family moved to St. Louis when he was six. He was working as a postal clerk when a job opened up with the *St. Louis Times* as a sportswriter, which paid less money. An avid sports fan, he took the job, and quickly gained a reputation not so much for being a great writer, but for an ability to dig out good stories because of his many sources, and quickly became a well-known figure throughout the sports community. He covered the baseball Cardinals, the team which later became legendary in that sport as the World Series winning "Gashouse Gang," and became friends with many of the players. One of his best friends at the time was one of baseball's all-time greatest hitters, Rogers Hornsby, and in St. Louis, wrestling always mixed in better with the regular sports scene. He became friendly with the likes of Babe Ruth, Frankie Frisch, Mae West and Al Capone. He was a good handball player and hung out at Harry Cook's Gym, where the local wrestlers trained. He became good friends with legendary wrestler Ray Steele, and, largely through osmosis, started learning the wrestling business.

"He and Ray Steele were close," noted Lou Thesz. "But Ray was a prankster. One time they drove together to Houston. Ray had rented the car and then stopped at the hotel to get some sleep and told Sam to drive around town. Ray called up the police and reported the rental car as stolen. The police picked up Sam, and put him in jail." In 1932, the *Times* merged with the *St. Louis Star*, and Muchnick was out of a job. A third paper offered him a job, while at the same time Tom Packs, the local wrestling promoter and at the time one of the "Big Six," a collection of wrestling promoters who basically controlled the entire country, offered him a job to be his publicist and right-hand man in the operation. He chose wrestling.

With Packs as one of the country's biggest promoters and Muchnick quickly learning the ropes, he almost immediately became one of the leading movers and shakers in the industry. By the late 30s, wrestling around the country had hit the skids. Packs was doing better than most and was looking to create a new home town hero, the son of a Hungarian immigrant named Lajos Tiza, who became wrestling's biggest icon as Lou Thesz, a 20-year-old local stud wrestler thought to have enormous potential who Muchnick had on occasion played handball with. A story was created that in a private workout, Thesz actually pinned Strangler Lewis in 20 seconds. The real story was there was a workout, and actually Thesz was crushed so badly he nearly quit wrestling altogether, and Lewis had to talk him into coming back. Nevertheless, the seeds were put in motion, and on December 29, 1937, 21-year-old Thesz became the youngest widely-recognized world champion in the history of the industry beating Everett Marshall in St. Louis for the title of the old MWA (and later that era's version of the American Wrestling Association, which ran out of New England and Quebec). Thesz actually was originally not supposed to win, but because the advance was so strong and everyone was looking for a new sensation to save the business, Packs was able to maneuver the title to his man. The reign was short-lived, as Thesz refused to sign a one-sided contract and they quickly took the belt off him, but during that period, Muchnick and Thesz would travel to various cities by train, with Muchnick going to all the local media in these days before television existed, hyping his man and building up the local title match. He did that in Thesz' second title reign as well.

It isn't exactly clear what happened between Muchnick and Packs, only that Muchnick was promised something that wasn't delivered, and

decided to run opposition. He contacted Sam Lefton, the President of Lefton Steel and Construction about backing an opposition wrestling promotion, and opened up with a show on March 27, 1942. It was not an immediate hit, and after running three more shows, he was called into the service for World War II. He re-opened shortly after the War ended, on December 5, 1945, building around old-time St. Louis favorites long past their prime like Strangler Lewis, Steele, and even Jim Londos. He was able to sustain operations even though the matches he was promoting were slower-paced, drawing fans to see the stars they grew up with since Packs pretty well had him squeezed out of getting any current name talent. While his wrestling operation did well, Packs had outside business interests that went sour causing him to need cash. He sold his wrestling operation to a consortium consisting of Thesz as the majority owner, with smaller shares going to Eddie Quinn of Montreal, Frank Tunney of Toronto, area wrestler Bobby Managoff and another wrestler who was a huge draw in the market, "Wild" Bill Longson. Longson, the inventor of the piledriver, and Thesz feuded over the National Wrestling Association world title in the ring, playing to huge business in 1947.

With Thesz running one side and Muchnick the other, the former friends (who after both were out of the business maintained their friendship to Sam's death) turned into bitter rivals. The newspapers locally reported it as Martin Thesz, Lou's father, buying the company since Lou was the top babyface headliner. Almost immediately, Muchnick, always the politician, went to Thesz to settle the differences and try to work together, but Thesz was doing huge business with "Wild" Bill Longson, feuding over the National Wrestling Association world heavyweight title, and Muchnick was struggling, so he figured he'd wait things out figuring Muchnick was on the ropes.

The origins of the National Wrestling Alliance were rather modest, and its original intentions were never close to what it wound up being. Muchnick got together on July 14, 1948 with five other promoters, Al Haft out of Columbus, OH, who was the key since he controlled Buddy Rogers, Pinky George out of Iowa, Tony Stecher out of Minneapolis, Max Clayton of Omaha and Orville Brown out of Kansas City, at the President Hotel in Waterloo, IA. Muchnick was just looking at making allies to supply him with talent, and in turn, all promoters would work together to trade off talent and help each other to protect each other's interests, sending top talent to oppose anyone infringing on their territorial borders, to respect others' territories, and in the event any wrestler would do something detrimental to wrestling, whatever that was to mean, as it could mean a wrestler got out of line, was becoming an embarrassment to the business, or it could just mean they stood up for themselves on money or business issues, they'd all agree not to book that wrestler, or a nice way of saying they would blacklist them. Of course, that was highly illegal and led to another important chapter in wrestling's history and where Muchnick truly consolidated power. The group named Brown, who was the champion already recognized both by Haft and in Brown's own Kansas City office, in October of 1948 as the first ever National Wrestling Alliance world heavyweight champion, a title that was soon to have a lot of meaning. Over the next decade it would be defended in nearly every corner of the world where pro wrestling was presented.

More important at the beginning than Brown or whoever held Muchnick's cartel's championship, was Rogers. Haft sent him to St. Louis in November 1948, and he almost immediately turned the tide in his operation. On February 4, 1949, Rogers vs. Don Eagle headlined Muchnick's first runaway crowd ever at Kiel Auditorium. Nobody ever questioned which of the two drew the house. With Rogers on top, Muchnick started winning the war, and was able to pay back Lefton and gain financial ownership of the office. Other promoters, seeing how successful the new NWA was, looking for help in protection from outsiders and in controlling rebel wrestlers, began joining up. Thesz was on the wrong end of an organization gaining in power. It was only a few months later when Thesz went to Muchnick, offering to become partners. Thesz was worn out by the travel and defending his version of the title which was losing in exposure, and running a business in a war at the same time. Muchnick was worried that if he lost Rogers, who was always tough to do business with, he'd be back in trouble and felt business would be more profitable for everyone in a one promotion market and with Thesz in the ring on his side as a steady draw. The sides agreed to merge promotions 50/50, with Muchnick running the

business end. From a public standpoint, it was still presented to fans as separate companies so it would appear to be competition and neither side would lose face, one owned by Muchnick, the other by Martin Thesz. But they ran the same building, used most of the same talent, and promoted each others' shows. Besides, with Thesz holding the title of the old NWA, and Brown of the new NWA, Muchnick was able to have a match that was to be scheduled for November 25, 1949, the elusive world title unification match.

Most likely Brown would have gone over, given the politics of who settled and where the power at the time lied. But the match never took place, as three weeks earlier, Brown suffered a serious automobile accident, which at the time was thought to have ended his career. By default, Thesz was named champion. The rest of the alliance went along with it, being Thesz by this time already had a reputation as being one of the biggest stars in the game and had made a name as champion all over North America. And wrestling was getting on network television as many as four nights a week in prime time. Thesz wasn't the best known wrestling star of that era. That was Gorgeous George. But he became the credible real wrestler, genuinely respected by many, maybe even most, for being a legitimate great wrestler and top athlete, even if some questioned the validity of his sport. In news clips, he was portrayed as the straight outsider in a less than straight business, almost the same way Muchnick was portrayed by his friends in the media. Thesz would be shown in news reports training on the beach or wrestling in the gym while the rest of the crew dressed up in funny costumes. He remained champion, with the exception of taking a vacation period in 1956, for the next eight years. By this point Muchnick became the most powerful business force in the NWA, since Thesz was his man. The NWA was never at any point the cohesive force it looked to be from the outside. The members never trusted each other, and all had entirely different ideas of what wrestling was. They were almost all out for the quick buck, which meant no different than from what it means today. Whatever worked, or for that matter didn't work but someone came up with anyway, in the short run, was tried. While Muchnick would have liked for wrestling around the country to be what it wasn't, he never meddled in others' business unless it involved booking of the champion. And he kept wrestling in St. Louis as sports-like as was possible, and tried, also, to maintain that with the NWA champion. He felt it was important to have a great athlete as champion, to be able to put on a credible and entertaining match, to guard against the double-cross from a promoter or wrestler trying to steal the title, as happened many times in the 20s and 30s, and to present a real athlete to the media when the champion came to town as the showpiece of the Alliance. Lewis, who was well-known and well-liked by the older sportswriters from being the biggest wrestling star of the 20s, was sent on the road as Thesz' manager and really his advance publicity man. Even though Lewis' matches weren't real either, by this time so much time had passed and nostalgia made people believe Lewis was world champion in the days wrestling was real, and he had credibility, and when he endorsed Thesz as the real deal, it meant something. The champion had to put up a \$25,000 bond, huge money in those days, basically to make sure he'd do the job when the time came. Every year the NWA would have a convention and decide whether or not to renew Thesz as champion. Thesz would often be worried going into the meetings because he was often at odds with some promoters over the direction they were taking the business, but Lewis always calm him by saying that as long as he was drawing money, they'd never vote him out. Muchnick, the ultimate politician, kept them in line, and as NWA President, booked the dates for the champion, which generally meant the biggest houses for the promoters, so everyone needed to stay on Muchnick's good side to get the best weekend dates. Even though many didn't like the added expense (Lewis was guaranteed 3% of the gate in all title matches, plus Muchnick got a 3% booking fee and Thesz got 8%), Thesz was never voted out. He had gained so much prestige that more and more promoters wanted to join the Alliance both for their own protection against outside forces, and to get what would be considered dates on the legitimate world title. At its peak, 38 different major regional offices covering most of the United States, Canada, Mexico, Japan, Australia and New Zealand and many smaller countries as well, were part of the NWA. In doing so, they had to relinquish their claims to the world title, which meant more unification matches (the first \$100,000 gate in history for the 1952 Thesz vs. Baron Leone match in Southern California was unifying Leone's local world title with Thesz more widely recognized version). After the networks canceled wrestling in 1955,

Muchnick got a brief run on the NBC affiliate in St. Louis for a locally produced show from the St. Louis House, but it was canceled after one season and he had no television to create stars or promote the local matches.

Muchnick's down period started at this point. Several things happened at about the same time. His relations with Thesz, which were always bitter since he was the intermediary between Thesz and the rest of the promoters, all of whom had different ideas than Thesz about what wrestling was, got worse. Thesz was constantly warring over the style of wrestling some of the smaller promotions used, usage of women wrestlers (the NWA at the time had a rule regarding title credibility that no women wrestling matches, regarded at the time as something of a freak attraction to titillate men, could be held on a card with the champion but promoters from time to time ignored that doctrine which Thesz was adamant about), and working too many small towns dates. Muchnick was trying to keep the promoters in North America happy, and thus not sending Thesz on world tours which in the long run were more lucrative for Thesz and potentially the NWA itself, which largely led to the split. Muchnick's own business was inconsistent, largely down because he had no television, drawing between 2,000 and 7,000 to his house shows. He survived mainly on his relations with the local media, and Thesz' reputation with the local wrestling fans. To augment his struggling wrestling operation, he began promoting outside events such as pro boxing and the Harlem Globetrotters, the latter of which remained a huge arena draw for him well into the 70s. Finally, Thesz saw how much money was in Japan to work with and put Rikidozan over and he felt Muchnick didn't see the big picture. Thesz basically quit the NWA, booked himself into Japan, sold his shares of St. Louis to Tunney and Quinn, gave the title to Dick Hutton instead of to Rogers, who Thesz at the time hated and refused to put over, and who the NWA wanted as champ. Hutton, who was a great amateur wrestler but didn't have a lot of charisma as a pro, didn't draw with the title. Thesz was gone from the NWA for the most part.

Thesz made his big money in Japan and then heading to Europe. Most important of all, when the NWA blacklisted wrestler Sonny Myers, he got a lawyer and sued the NWA successfully. The Justice Department became interested and the NWA, which meant virtually every major promoter in the business, was in a fight for its life, because all member promoters faced the potential of prosecution, heavy fines and even jail terms for conspiracy in areas such as restraint of trade, attempted monopolization practices, etc.

Ironically, this was where Muchnick solidified his power in wrestling. He had long been friends with an influential congressman and long-time wrestling fan, Mel Price, who would sit at the matches with him and go out to dinner with him after the shows. Price negotiated a consent decree, which all the promoters were forced to sign, which basically made them promise not to do anything illegal (which after awhile, they started back doing again, very similar to the business' reaction to its own downfall in the early 90s) but the group could continue as a group of independent promoters doing business. Nobody would dare cross Muchnick at this point because of the consent decree hanging on their head. While the NWA Presidency bounced around before this time, although Muchnick generally was in control, with elections at the Alliance meetings, Muchnick's re-elections became a formality and he was in charge of the Alliance and of the biggest title in the game.

The down period ended in 1958 when Muchnick negotiated a deal with KPLR-TV in St. Louis for a new concept in wrestling on TV, "Wrestling at the Chase." Matches were held in a hotel ballroom dinner theater. Originally it was held in the Corasan Room, a banquet room populated by an upscale audience where wrestling fans wore suits and ties, women wore evening gowns and sat at tables. Muchnick took the title from Hutton and gave it to New Zealander Pat O'Connor, who later became his booker, winning it January 9, 1959 in St. Louis. Wrestling was rebounding in some parts of the country through local television, Chicago in particular was on fire with Rogers. Rogers vs. O'Connor became not only the biggest match in wrestling, but turned into the hottest drawing program up to that point in time in history. The two set what was then the all-time record crowd and gate drawing 38,622 fans at Comiskey Park in Chicago on June 30, 1961, the night Rogers captured the title. This led to another of Muchnick and the Alliance's biggest fights.

While Thesz was as close to an undisputed and universally recognized champion as pro wrestling would ever have, probably since the early 30s, there were always other titles running around. In 1960, Verne Gagne got television in Minneapolis and control of the promotion and created the modern version of the AWA, built around himself as perennial champion, building a storyline of a title history off a screw-job finish in a famous June 14, 1957 Chicago match where Thesz lost to Edouard Carpentier.

Rogers, when he won the title, wasn't booked by Muchnick, and instead was being booked largely by Toots Mondt, which probably more than anything shows just how strong a drawing card Rogers truly was. Mondt, whose power in wrestling dated back to the 20s as a top shooter and one of the original Gold Dust Trio with Lewis and Billy Sandow, at this point ran the Northeast along with his business partner, Vince McMahon Sr. They made it very difficult for the rest of the promoters to get dates, and almost impossible to get weekend dates on Rogers. The NWA members were panicking. Muchnick also caught wind of rumors that Mondt and McMahon were going to quit the NWA, take Rogers with them, thus destroy the foundation of the Alliance since the title was its cornerstone and without it chaos would reign. Even if they could get it together and create a new champion as would be done today in the same situation, if Rogers was gone and still had their belt, as Ric Flair ironically did about three decades later, the NWA members feared their champion wouldn't be taken as a legitimate champion by the fans. Muchnick called up Thesz, who by this time was 46 years old and living in semi-retirement in Arizona. Rogers, in a fashion reminiscent of a modern day Shawn Michaels, wound up with a broken hand trying to walk out on a dressing room confrontation (the aforementioned Gotch/Miller incident where as he was leaving, they slammed the door, breaking his hand), thus missing their first scheduled match. A second match was arranged, but just before that took place, Rogers suffered a broken ankle two minutes into a match in Montreal against Killer Kowalski. Kowalski actually toured, billed as a "world title claimant," while Rogers was out, with the NWA not recognizing Kowalski because they hadn't approved of the title change ahead of time, and since Rogers never came out for the second fall of the best of three fall Montreal match, that was the excuse given publicly. Two months later, they were booked again in Toronto, and many of the major promoters, including McMahon and Mondt, were there for the promotional showdown that would climax in the ring with Thesz and Rogers. Muchnick had decreed if Rogers didn't get in the ring and do the job, his \$25,000 bond would be forfeited to charity. And with Thesz there, unless he never got in the ring, he was going to be doing the job one way or another. And since it was known that McMahon was grooming Bruno Sammartino to be his champion, he made sure, for title credibility, that Thesz beat Sammartino in their now famous Toronto match a few months later.

McMahon and Mondt publicly claimed that since the Thesz-Rogers match was one fall, and because Thesz was semi-retired and not the legitimate top contender, that they weren't recognizing him as champion. Rogers appeared with a new belt, called the World Wide Wrestling Federation title, a few weeks later, having won the first of those legendary Rio de Janeiro fictitious tournaments, and almost immediately dropped the belt to Sammartino in 47 seconds in Madison Square Garden shortly after whatever exactly happened or didn't happen to Rogers' heart which wound up taking Rogers out of pro wrestling for years.

Nevertheless, as always the politician and businessman, Muchnick, McMahon and Mondt had several meetings in 1965 about unifying the title, creating a Thesz vs. Sammartino match on closed-circuit, which had never been done before, and would be the biggest match in history. It never took place for a number of reasons. The agreement made by Muchnick, McMahon and Mondt would be for Sammartino to win the first match, and keep the title for one year, and Thesz would get it back. They'd end up unifying the belts. Muchnick would get both a \$50,000 payoff from McMahon and Mondt for buying the title belt for one year, and Muchnick would also bring the powerful Northeast territory back in the NWA. Thesz didn't trust they'd ever give it back and was reluctant to do the job, and asked for a \$100,000 guarantee for doing the job, an exorbitant price in those days, which McMahon balked at. Sammartino, when seeing the schedule he was going to be under as unified WWWF and NWA world champion, being on the road

28 days per month, also balked. The match never took place, but for his part in not going along with Muchnick's plan, Thesz' days as NWA champion were about to end for good. On January 7, 1966 in St. Louis, Gene Kiniski captured the title, a decision somewhat controversial among some NWA members since Kiniski had just come off working WWWF and putting over Sammartino, which in those days, as silly as this sounds today, made a lot of people then consider Sammartino as the real champion. It wasn't until 1972 when the WWWF finally rejoined the NWA, although with their own title, re-named WWWF heavyweight champion as opposed to world heavyweight champion (and in WWF arena programs during the 70s, the NWA champion was always billed as the world heavyweight champion), with the exception of a unification angle involving Harley Race and Bob Backlund, the NWA champ didn't appear in WWWF cities.

Kiniski held the title for three years, before having a showdown with the promoters at an alliance meeting, and it was his time to go. Dory Funk Jr., only 27, the son of the wily promoter of the Amarillo territory was the controversial choice at first due to his lack of national experience and the feeling he was manipulated into the position by Dory Sr. But his critics fell by the wayside rather quickly as he proved to be not only a great worker in the ring, but a tremendous draw as champion, and held the title for more than four years from February 11, 1969 through May 24, 1973 and is generally remembered as the prototype of the NWA champion of that era. Funk's reign was highlighted by his now legendary series of 60:00 (and even a few 90:00) title matches against Jack Brisco. Brisco, who was a huge star in Florida already and had wrestled for the title a few times as a regional hero, became a national superstar when he and Dory went to the first of their many 60:00 draws and first of their many sellouts for Muchnick on January 1, 1971, putting perhaps the hottest feud of that decade on the international stage since everything in St. Louis became big news in Japan due to the magazine coverage. While this was going on, Japan was in turmoil as the two biggest stars, Shohei Baba and Antonio Inoki both quit the NWA-recognized JWA promotion, with each forming new companies, the beginnings of both All Japan and New Japan. Baba came to St. Louis for several days of meetings with Muchnick, and with the help of Dory Sr., got NWA recognition which meant access to the top NWA talent in what ended up being one of the most lengthy and bitter promotional wars in history. Getting the title from Funk Jr. proved to be another headache for Muchnick, as there was a Rogers-like incident of him suffering a shoulder injury just days before he was scheduled to lose to Brisco in Houston on March 2, 1973. Brisco and Terry Funk were sent on the road to fulfill the champions' dates for the next nine weeks, putting over local favorites in every territory to make them stronger when Brisco returned to the markets with the belt.

As it turned out, Funk Jr., shortly after returning from the injury, dropped the title to Race in Kansas City, to set up the new era with Brisco getting the title in Houston on July 20, 1973. Brisco turned out to be Muchnick's last hand-picked NWA champion, but not his last hand-picked champion. In 1975, at the age of 70, Muchnick officially resigned as President of the NWA and at the alliance meetings, Jack Adkisson (Fritz Von Erich) took over. The actual story was not quite as nice. Muchnick's primary job as NWA President, besides to settle territorial disputes, was to book the champion, and he received his 3% commission of the after-tax gross on all NWA title match shows, which in those days had grown to approximately \$100,000 per year. Several of the Alliance members wanted to get the power from Muchnick, and the Justice Department Consent decree by this time was ancient history. While Adkisson took over as President, Jim Barnett was given the job of booking the dates of the champion, by agreeing to do the same job for free. While historically, this was the period where the champion started doing far more screw-job finishes as nobody oversaw how the champion was being treated or cared about credibility any longer. The Alliance members, as usual, saw getting a freer hand in title matches in their territory, since Muchnick would always pressure that the champion needed to win his programs at the end and not do finishes that were too silly, even if they could do draws and DQ's to keep a program going, plus the ability to keep more of the gate for themselves when booking the champion. And the Southern power base of the NWA, the likes of Eddie Graham and Barnett, and the Welch clan, had formed their own clique and was looking at taking control of the organization with Adkisson as the compromise choice as President before it went to Graham.

"I can remember, Harley Race and I were talking before he had a meeting with Sam begging him not to resign," said Matysik. "He said how Sam was old and behind the times, but he said if Sam gave this up, this whole (NWA) business is going to collapse. Fritz and Graham were great disappointments to Sam. He thought they would run it based on what was good for the NWA, but they only cared about what was good for Texas and Florida."

In 1970, Gust Karras, who ran Kansas City, had bought out Quinn and Managoff. A few years later, O'Connor, Bob Geigel and Race bought out Karras. Eventually Verne Gagne bought half of Longson's 15%, which Geigel and O'Connor didn't like because they felt it meant Sam would use more AWA talent instead of Kansas City talent underneath. When Longson died, Geigel, Race and Gagne bought the other half.

After resigning as President, the NWA changed. But St. Louis Wrestling didn't. "It was the last city where wrestling didn't prostitute itself," said Ric Flair. The ring was a large, very hard ring that may have originally been a boxing ring. Unless you knew how to take bumps like Race or Flair, it could be a painful experience, unless you knew how to wrestle. The crowd was by far the most educated and appreciative in the country toward wrestling itself. It was sold to them as a sport, where the winning and losing in every match moved you that much further up or down the pecking order. It was a constant story of young star of the future, or older veteran, coming to town, getting some wins, and challenging for the title. There was blood maybe a half dozen times every decade, usually reserved for the climactic Texas death matches, and in those matches, one guy won and the other guy was dead on his back. No foreign objects whatsoever. No low blows. And wrestlers, whether they be heels or faces, won clean, almost always with their signature winning hold. Finishes were not a negotiable item. One time in the early 70s, Lars Anderson came to town and balked about doing a job for Bobo Brazil, because Brazil was old and really couldn't wrestle and this was a wrestling town. But Brazil was an established star and Muchnick protected stars, and was brought in for a reason. Anderson was told to leave and never worked in the city again.

"The fans there were more appreciative of hard work," noted Dory Funk. "They were like the Japanese fans of today. If it wasn't hard work, they wouldn't accept it. It was the best NWA city. Sam catered to what his fans wanted."

Prelim wrestlers couldn't use main event finishers (unless they had already established it as their winning move). You couldn't choke, or come off the top rope, or drop a knee to the throat, or rake the eyes. Only one man was allowed outside the ring at any time, even in the main event, unless it was specifically booked as a rare double count out finish. All those moves kids growing up in other parts of the country were told proved wrestling was fake were for the most part eliminated by Sam, because he didn't want his social circle saying things to him like, "you know if you really jumped off the top rope with a knee to a guy's throat, he'd be dead." Run-ins almost never existed. Well, there was one in 1961 when Rogers wouldn't break the figure four on Bill Dromo, billed as a young protege of Valentine, and Valentine ran in and cleaned house to build to a big title gate. There was another in 1980 when Harley Race replaced an injured guy in a tag match and was pinned by Ted DiBiase, instantly making DiBiase into a credible world title contender, and there's more to that story as well. On the surface, to a fan today, it sounds like the matches must have been boring and had no heat. Fans from other cities may have viewed the television show, with just straight wrestling, straight announcing and for the most part, with few exceptions like Dick the Bruiser, straight sports-like interviews, and maybe two angles a year, usually to build a main event when Muchnick booked a show at the larger Checkerdome, as boring. But it drew tremendous ratings and with the exception of the news, was the top rated locally produced program in the market doing 8.0 to 12.0 ratings.

It was like All Japan at its peak when it went to the all-clean finish format. It was never like All Japan where every finish was clean, but most were. "Every blow off was a pin," remembered Matysik, who had a hand in the booking. "At the end of a program, somebody is going to

win and somebody is going to lose. We sold it on television as you had to win to get the big match."

With all those rules, St. Louis still had the reputation, from all accounts deserved, as having the best wrestling matches in the country. Some would argue that from top-to-bottom, because there were no angles or issues built into the prelim matches, which often featured Kansas City workers, other than a guy was going to win and you'd see how high on the card he'd climb, that a lot of territories had better undercards, but it was pretty well agreed no city could match St. Louis consistently for the main events because it was top talent vs. top talent in long two out of three fall matches. Usually. The city's most popular wrestler was Bruiser, who could do little by the 70s and nothing by the 80s, but for whatever reason, because he was different from the rest, he was over and drew as well as anyone, particularly since he never got the big title. His main events weren't classics, although people like Flair, Dick Murdoch and Funk were said to have carried him to some surprisingly good matches. One time Jack Brisco had a 60:00 draw with Brazil, or Dory Jr. had to go 60:00 with Rufus Jones, and those were not exactly stuff legends were made of. But most of the time, the main events, in that era had names like Dory Funk Jr., Brisco, Race, Valentine, Kiniski, Murdoch--the biggest names and the best workers of the era. By the late 70s, the aforementioned names with the exception of Valentine (whose career was ended in a 1975 plane crash) were still around, and people like Flair, Bruiser Brody, David Von Erich, DiBiase and Ken Patera were added to the headline mix.

"It was like nothing I'd ever seen before," said Flair, who debuted in the market in 1978 after only having worked regularly in the AWA and the Carolinas. "The Carolinas were a virgin territory as well, but they'd seen a lot more blood. The fans there treated it like it was a sport. If a guy just pulled hair, the fans would go crazy. I loved wrestling there. The media really looked at Sam as being a legitimate sports figure and the wrestlers had great notoriety in that town. He was like the David Stern of St. Louis."

It wasn't until 1969 that Muchnick even let a manager into the city, Bobby Heenan, and that was largely because Blackjack Lanza had turned into a major draw in Chicago and other Midwestern cities with a legendary feud with Bruiser, and Heenan was his heat. Even when Lanza was pushed to the top, and was responsible for turning Bruiser babyface in St. Louis as well, and Dick became the most popular wrestler in town, and later Lanza drew a sellout at the Checkerdome challenging Dory for the world title, everyone knew Heenan was far more responsible than Lanza for it getting over. Muchnick paid Heenan opening match money, figuring that the man in the ring deserves the big payoff. Once on TV when they were building Lanza, Heenan did a spot where he tripped the opponent, and the refs, taught to treat it as a shoot, immediately DQ'd Lanza. It was a very rabid crowd, and they hated when the heel would win clean in the main event, and often were close to rioting in that situation, but Muchnick felt when a heel had to win because he was being built up for something big, or he'd have the champ play subtle heel because the crowd always wanted to see the elusive history-making title change that they only saw once every few years, and had to maintain credibility of the title, so the win had to be clean. And most of all, because of his background with sports people and around sports, the biggest difference of all from a wrestler standpoint, is that the referees had to be protected.

The referees got their orders from Sam himself, whereas the wrestlers got their direct orders from O'Connor, although for the most part he was carrying Sam's messages. They knew the finishes, but the rest of their job was to referee it as if it was a shoot. Some basic things were to be allowed, the heel hair pulling or trunk pulling early to get easy heat. But the ref wasn't allowed to be made a fool of. If a wrestler was outside the ring, the referee was to start counting. The wrestler had to get in the ring to stop the count or he'd be counted out, whether that was the planned finish or not. Among his referees were Babe Martin, a former St. Louis Browns baseball player, Joe Schoenberger, the head of all youth baseball in the area and a well-known area Golden Gloves boxing champ, and Charles Venator, the No. 2 man in the St. Louis post office. It was considered a prestige position to referee a world title match at the Kiel. The ref had to get on his stomach to make the counts on near falls because that's truly the only way to see if the shoulders are up. Refs who due to ring injuries, like Sonny Myers or

Terry Garvin, couldn't get down past one knee, weren't allowed to ref matches with near falls. If the ref told a wrestler to break, they broke. A wrestler couldn't grab the ropes or put their feet on the ropes for cheap heat, because the ref would have to immediately break it or be taken for a fool. There was no touching a ref. Refs did get bumped maybe two or three times a decade for controversy in world title match finishes to build a return, but there would be no controversy of that sort in the eventual blow-off. Refs were instructed that, even in a world title match, if the wrestler doesn't get the shoulder up, you count three. It's the wrestlers' job to make it look real and not the ref's job to protect the wrestlers when they don't do their job. Even Dick the Bruiser or Bruiser Brody, when they were yelled at by the ref, knew they had to take a step backwards and sell to get over that the ref was in control of the match.

On February 10, 1973, Terry Funk was brought in for a TV taping to win the Missouri State title, which automatically set someone up for a world title match, being that Dory was supposed to lose to Brisco, it would eventually put two Funk brothers in the title chase. Muchnick wasn't at the tapings until late due to a social engagement. Booker O'Connor accepted a finish since it was going to be billed as a no DQ match, where Funk was to hit Valentine in the knee with a chair. Chairs had never been used in St. Louis previously. After that, Funk would gain the submission with the spinning toe hold. Muchnick actually arrived at the taping just before the finish and freaked out seeing it, actually as a shoot, overruling the decision on the spot and holding up the title. He came into the dressing room and screamed at O'Connor, and immediately changed his booking plans. He also ordered the belt given back to Valentine at the next house show (which was the show right after Valentine's heart attack, so Kiniski wound beating Funk and getting the belt).

When The Sheik, who was the top drawing heel in the country at the time and owned the then-hot Detroit territory, came in to wrestle O'Connor, he was DQ'd in like 24 seconds for brawling outside the ring, a St. Louis no-no. It nearly caused a riot because they didn't do 24 second matches. Muchnick was embarrassed, and since he agreed to book him for two dates, kept his word and gave him a prelim match against a wrestler nobody has ever heard of on his second show, and never used him again. When George Steele came in, Muchnick never allowed him to do any of his gimmick because that wasn't the style of wrestling he was promoting and he was mad Steele used those kind of tactics since at the time Steele was a powerhouse could actually wrestle a little, but even so, he never got over. Muchnick could also carry a grudge. In 1974, he brought in Wahoo McDaniel and Billy Robinson from the AWA. Robinson was a St. Louis style wrestler, and quickly made a rep doing a 45:00 draw with Race in a Missouri title match. However, Muchnick felt they were trying to swerve him on a trans bill, and even though that was a regular part of the business elsewhere, it wasn't his business and they, from another business, didn't understand. He never booked McDaniel again, and didn't book Robinson again for three years and when he did, never gave him any kind of a meaningful push. When Dusty Rhodes was the hottest draw in the NWA, Muchnick did use him fairly strong, but never gave him the push others did, feeling that Rhodes lack of conditioning made the business look bad, even when it was clear few had the ability to draw a crowd like him.

A few years later, Muchnick made a deal with Haskell Cohen to do a nationally syndicated wrestling show via satellite. The idea was for it to be an NWA All-Star show, where the various promoters would send their top stars to get national recognition, and would allow the biggest names to be seen in every NWA market so promoters would have the top guys from other territories already over to their audience so they would mean something when brought in for major shows. Clearly he saw the future of the business and this was it. Still, most of the promoters, younger than him, didn't see the future and didn't see where they would get any immediate gain from letting fans in their territory see wrestlers on television that they didn't control. Muchnick got Verne Gagne, Race, Bob Geigel, Gust Karras and Bruiser together for a taping in Kansas City. Just before the show, the satellite crashed and before it could be put together, the deal fell apart. It may have been a few years ahead of its time.

Muchnick's final world title creation came in 1977. Bob Backlund, a former NCAA Division II champion college wrestler with a good physique that had gotten a minor push in Florida and a bigger push in Georgia, was brought in to be Sam's next version of Brisco. In order, he beat Race via DQ, lost to Kiniski, beat Race for the Missouri title, got a few wins underneath to keep the title, lost by DQ to Race before beating him again, and then went 60:00 with then-champion Terry Funk, losing one fall. No doubt those opponents made him appear to be a far better worker than he really was. McMahon Sr. called him up, saying with Sammartino going to lose the title and he was going with Billy Graham as a transition champion, he was looking for someone to make the next big thing. After Sammartino and Morales had been ethnic heroes (although Sammartino's popularity transcended his ethnicity), and with Graham's role, he was looking for the opposite of Graham, a humble All-American boy, and Muchnick recommended Backlund, who had a six-year run on top of the WWWF until the Hogan era.

Although he was no longer the major power broker in wrestling, Muchnick's business was on fire in the late 70s, largely built around the rise of new top stars Flair, DiBiase, Brody, Patera, Backlund and David Von Erich trading wins on the trail of champion Race, along with his established former champions like Brisco and Dory. Flair, who had already helped turned the Carolinas, had never headlined in another territory yet and was being thought of as the hottest young talent in the country when he was brought into St. Louis by Muchnick. That was a fight as well, as O'Connor felt Flair was too small to make it in St. Louis (other top stars elsewhere from the same era that were brought in, Buzz Sawyer and Roddy Piper of note, and even Ray Stevens a few years earlier, were never pushed for that reason, very similar if time was transixed and they went to today's All Japan, and thus were never considered for the NWA title). If Muchnick hadn't have overruled him in insisting Flair be brought in, and Flair wouldn't have gotten over in St. Louis, he never would have been in line for the title that he made his career and legend with. But he got over instantaneously in his first match in early 1978 against Omar Atlas. He became a top national star when on his second match in the city, he pinned Dory to set him up with a series of title matches at then-champion Race. The matches drew packed houses and he was made. His win over Dory also set him up on a Japan tour right after, as on his first night in, he was allowed to pin Giant Baba in a tag match at a time when such a thing just didn't happen. Although Muchnick by this point was no longer the star-maker, this success put Flair in line, and on September 17, 1981 in Kansas City, he pinned Rhodes to win the first of what would be something like 15 world title victories. In a rare angle, Von Erich bloodied up and pinned Race in a non-title match on TV using the claw, a match which aired in various markets around the country and made him more than just a Texas star. Von Erich's charisma, as the son of one of the city's biggest icons chasing what his father never won, became an incredible hit and, like would happen a few years later in Texas, the traditional fans were joined by a huge throng of kids and teenagers, creating a rock concert like atmosphere at the wrestling matches. And then, when it was never bigger, it ended.

On January 31, 1981, his wife of nearly 40 years, Helen, passed away. He had fought one war after another trying to keep the promoters in line, and keep the credibility into a business that had none and was getting worse all around him. He had set up the company, which he owned the controlling interest in, in a way to where if he were to die, all her interests would be protected. But she was gone and he was 75 years old, financially set for life, in a young man's business that was changing in ways he didn't like. The next champion was going to be Rhodes. He had no reason to continue. On February 6, 1981, Race defended the title against DiBiase. Sam wasn't at the matches, as he was still grieving over his wife's death. They decided to do something different. It had been done before in other territories. DiBiase went for a tackle. Race moved. He hit ref Venator, who took a bump out of the ring. Race attacked DiBiase. A second ref, Lee Warren, ran down to the ring. You've seen it a million times now. But this was five years before it became trademarked as the Carolinas-killing Dusty finish. Race was already doing this regularly around the country. DiBiase pinned Race, Warren counted three. Venator saw a DQ before the pin. The fans thought they'd seen the elusive title change and the start of the career of a new legend. When they found out differently, there was nearly a riot. The fans had never seen a screw-job finish like this one.

And they didn't like it. A chair whizzed by Matysik's head as he got in the ring to tell fans the title didn't change hands. Those fans didn't go to wrestling to get screwed. They were never taught what the feeling was like. But they were about to learn--fast. At that point, Muchnick decided to retire at the end of the year. On January 1, 1982, Muchnick presented his final show at the St. Louis Arena, drawing a sellout 19,819 fans to see Flair beat Rhodes in the main event. A Who's Who of St. Louis sports celebrities were at the show, as were many wrestlers, some long since retired, and others whose careers he made, including Joe Garagiola, a former Cardinals baseball player who gained his early announcing experience doing "Wrestling at the Chase," and letter became a national baseball broadcaster and co-host of the "Today" show.

The modern promoters, Gagne, Geigel, Race and O'Connor, got St. Louis for themselves, and ran it into the ground in two years with all the modern ideas, along with the no-shows and screw-job finishes the fans weren't used to. This created so much goodwill locally that crowds dwindled and they lost their local TV. Vince McMahon Jr. took over "Wrestling at the Chase" in late 1983, quickly moved it from the Chase, and later from St. Louis, changing its name to WWF Superstars of Wrestling. On McMahon's first episode of Wrestling at the Chase on December 27, 1983, Hulk Hogan, Gene Okerlund, David Shults and Roddy Piper all made their initial appearances of that WWF run, the former three walking out on Gagne just as he was ready to do a lucrative winter run. The war was on. St. Louis was the first battle zone. McMahon ran his first show in St. Louis a few weeks later and drew a turnaway crowd to Kiel. After a lengthy battle in which the WWF generally outdrew the NWA in the NWA's flagship city, in the short-run, both sides lost, as after a year or so of both sides doing good business with Hogan and Flair respectively, representing a style of wrestling the fans hadn't grown up with, each side was suddenly struggling to draw 3,500 fans per show. Eventually the NWA succumbed to its inability to organize, not just in St. Louis, but in every market, and with McMahon destroying them from the outside, and Jim Crockett destroying what was left of them from the inside a few years later by taking the champion and top draw, Flair, as his own full-time regular instead of circuit-traveling to what was left of the Alliance companies, the Alliance fell victim to modern realities and the inherent insatiable greed of those with the power. Crockett bought out Sam's partners, who had been beaten down by McMahon, and he continued a losing fight for this legendary wrestling city that nobody could make any money running. And with it, basically Sam's place in the selective amnesia version of the history of wrestling.

"If Sam had been younger and healthier, the results may have been different," Matysik noted. "He had the connections with NBC. He'd have learned about pay-per-view as quick as anyone." It wasn't until recent years with wrestling's latest boom that the new fans base has made St. Louis no different from any other city.

With business struggling for everyone, WWF did a Muchnick night in St. Louis, and actually sold it out based on honoring him, one of the only, if not the only promoter in history fans ever sold out a house twice to honor. In the summer of 1986, they held a tournament for the Sam Muchnick Cup. Muchnick agreed to do it with only one stipulation, the final had to be a "St. Louis" wrestling match, and coming down to Race beating Ricky Steamboat clean for the Cup, that's exactly what it was. Muchnick was friends with Jim Herd, and actually gave Herd advice at times when he ran WCW, but Herd didn't understand much of it, and his reign was a total failure. Perhaps Sam's concepts were outdated by then, but people were saying that about them for 25 years.

"How could they say he was behind the times?" Matysik questioned. "Isn't the ultimate job to put asses in the seats and get people to watch on television?"

It didn't matter. Herd's concepts never had a time or place. Muchnick came to a few WCW shows during its early history, most notably as a guest to see the Flair vs. Steamboat classic from New Orleans on April 2, 1989, and his final public appearance at a pro wrestling event was for the WWF's October 6, 1996 Badd Blood PPV at the new Kiel Center with Undertaker vs. Shawn Michaels in the Hell in a Cell match, where of all things, the WWF honored many of the former NWA

champions with glowing on-air testimonials written by Jim Cornette, although McMahon, doing the announcing, couldn't bring himself to refer to them as anything more than local St. Louis legends.

Muchnick's death was front page news in St. Louis. An article was written a few days later in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* sports section, listing the "Sweet 16"--the most famous matches and rivalries he promoted from the late 50s on, about as far back as anyone's memory would go--Thesz vs. Whipper Watson, Thesz vs. Kowalski, Rogers vs. Valentine, Kiniski vs. Ellis, Thesz vs. O'Connor, Bruiser vs. Von Erich, Thesz vs. Kiniski, Bruiser vs. Lanza, Race vs. Valentine, Terry Funk vs. Kiniski, Dory vs. Brisco, Race vs. Dory, Race vs. David Von Erich, Bruiser vs. Flair, Andre vs. Brody and Flair vs. Brody.

Neither WWF nor WCW acknowledged his death on any of their programming this past week. Perhaps in its own way, the lack of acknowledgement that this business has a successful past may predicate similar stories 30 or 40 years from now when the time comes to acknowledge today's innovators. In this industry, the day the company dies, all its history and accomplishments die with it. Those who are in power for that moment re-write history and who the historical figures were to fit their own egos and needs.

But in nearly five decades being a prime mover and shaker in the business, Muchnick never created any innovative angles or thought up new promotional concepts or storylines. But nobody was ever responsible for creating more wrestling legends. Or had more to do with shaping the business for three decades around the world. But in the future, others will do all that. But when it's over, will they be able to survive in this business for that length of time, and still come out of it as honest men? And when the final chapter is written on any of their lives, will the people that knew them best, as legendary sportswriter Bob Broeg wrote this past week, say about them, that they were the head of a den of thieves, and they brought honor to the den?

JANUARY 18, 1999

THE READERS PAGES

MUCHNICK

The Muchnick family appreciates your typically thorough and respectful obituary about my Uncle Sam, which I've shared with my cousins. By the way, it is interesting to note that while some wrestlers and their families, like Pat O'Connor and Gene Kiniski were guests at Sam's house, Sam's three kids wound up nowhere near the wrestling business. Dick became a doctor in suburban St. Louis. Dan is a CPA in the Atlanta area and Kathy founded a newspaper covering St. Louis business. For the historical record, I'd like to add a few random thoughts.

The first is about the Missouri State Athletic Commission. In those days, both boxing and wrestling were regulated by a state agency. Among other requirements, a percentage of the gate had to be donated to a charity. The St. Louis Wrestling Club was an American Legion post. With his political connections, Sam actually handpicked the commission chairmen and on occasion even used them in fleeting high-credibility angles. The one I remember was the time the commission, amidst great fanfare, banned Dick the Bruiser's kneedrop off the top rope, the effect of this action being simply to add another kind of DQ to the menu of options for finishes.

Another point that needs to be stressed is that most interviews on "Wrestling at the Chase,"--as conducted by Joe Garagiola, then Don Cunningham, George Abel and finally Larry Matysik, were remarkably straight by wrestling standards. Every once in a while, even a jobber like Angelo Poffo would get some mike time. When Rocky Johnson was interviewed, he was blown away by the expectation he should talk about his legitimate athletic background rather than do a soul skit.

But that reminds me of my final addendum to your excellent piece. Sam Muchnick, like many of his generation, was behind the times in race relations. My memory is that when Ernie Ladd hit St. Louis, which was a Jim Crow town until the early 60s, in around 1965, he got over huge on the undercard but never received a push. A few years later, Rufus R. Jones, who was popular among black fans but also played safely to white stereotypes but was an inferior performer, had the first NWA title shot ever for an African-American wrestler in St. Louis. Of course, today's promoters give black wrestlers far better opportunities, but also employ blatant race-baiting angles in the bargain. Others can decide whether that constitutes progress.

Irvin Muchnick
Berkeley, California

Your 1/11 issue was the best work you've ever done, even topping the Bruiser Brody issue and the Hart/McMahon issues. If someone wasn't familiar with the accomplishments of Muchnick before reading it, they certainly knew who he was and his importance in wrestling when they had finished reading it.

The highlight of my otherwise less than ordinary pro wrestling career came when Sam called me to work a St. Louis TV taping in 1973. I had only been in the business eight months when he let me work with then NWA world champion Jack Brisco in a TV match. He'd never seen me work, but went on the word of Gust Karras and Harley Race to give me the shot. The dressing room was a Who's Who of Pro Wrestling and I knew I was very lucky just to be there. I had just been working for Nick Gulas prior to this. Talk about going from one end of the spectrum to the other.

Everyone who ever met or knew Sam will miss him. The business has already suffered from his absence.

Tom Hankins
Los Angeles, California

JANUARY 25, 1999

MUCHNICK

As far as Sam Muchnick goes, I'm kind of young to properly comment. I knew he and Paul Boesch were considered two of the greatest and most honorable promoters of all-time. Just like every young wrestler should study Ric Flair tapes, the same goes for promoters studying the careers of Muchnick and Boesch and how they handled their business. I realize to most people the bottom line is money. that's fine. But when all is said and done and when you retire and have to look in the mirror every day, you should be able to look at yourself without guilt. Can any of today's promoters do that? I'm not saying everyone of them are crooks, but there should be more morals instilled in this business. Used Car Salesmen are more honorable.

Sports Illustrated recently asked what the best year in sports was. I'm proposing the same question to wrestling fans. I'm guessing 1989. WWF had Hogan vs. Savage & Andre which was good business. NWA had Flair, Funk and Steamboat on top. Portland had Roddy Piper returning to feud with The Grappler and Nord, plus Scotty the Body was hilarious for his time. And who can forget those Jushin Liger vs. Naoki Sano IWGP jr. title matches. For me, 1989 was my favorite year. How about you?

Vince Carolan
Stoughton, Massachusetts

DM: I think 1996 was my favorite year as far as the product itself, but without question the past two years have been the most interesting to cover. The Monday Night Wars had just started heating but they were fighting to build a better product and not trying to beat each other with shock value. Many companies in Japan were on fire presenting all different styles of wrestling. At

that point I felt that the wrestling industry offered a product for almost any type of wrestling fan, whether they wanted something that looked real, that was pro wrestling but not insulting, whether it was angle laden soap opera that there was at least some care in making some sense out of, whether it was simply matches with high quality work or violence oriented wrestling. You didn't have to like it all, but there was something there for almost every taste. 1989 was real fun watching WCW and New Japan, but I think most companies peaked in 1996 as far as presenting a good product. Since then WWF has improved, but I can't see any other major companies that have, although WCW and ECW have increased their business because wrestling is "in."

FEBRUARY 1, 1999

THE READERS PAGES

MUCHNICK

Your recent article on the late Sam Muchnick was outstanding and it brought back some great memories. Growing up in Florida during the territory's heyday, you always knew when Muchnick appeared on television that something big was going to happen, usually to hype a world title match with Dory Funk Jr. or Jack Brisco. To me, he was a great wrestling promoter and not just some guy backed by one of the biggest media conglomerates in the world or someone who has taken wrestling to prime time borderline smut.

Dave Flaherty
Fort Lauderdale, Florida

I'm watching Thunder as I write this. Am I ever tired of the taser and 20 man run-ins. I know I'm stuck in the past, but this is pathetic.

Your Sam Muchnick obituary was a classic story about a true wrestling classic. We'll never have another promoter like him in the wrestling business. Then again, except for him, we never did.

I wish you'd break down and write a history of pro wrestling book so I wouldn't feel like such a ghoul waiting for somebody to die.

Keith Priest
Kennesaw, Georgia

Wanted to let you know how much I enjoyed the article you did on Sam Muchnick. I'm so grateful that I was able to have seen the shows Muchnick promoted over the years. Our friendship went back nearly 50 years and we had continued to exchange letters and holiday greetings until his health became the worst. He was an icon, if not the icon of all the wrestling promoters.

Diane Devine
Denver, Colorado

Absolutely fabulous writing on the life and career of Sam Muchnick. Your ability to research, summarize and put into context the history of the sport, a term I use specifically in honor of the memory of Muchnick, is unparalleled. A movie documentary could be made with photos, film clips, stills and the narration of your text. A&E is a logical place for it to be done.

People my age reading this issue will be taken back to a special time, before the Internet and the Observer, when information about pro wrestling was pretty scarce to come by as a fan, but the suspension of disbelief was considerably easier. Dory Funk vs. Jack Brisco on the

cover of an Apter magazine, and photos of Ric Flair, Harley Race, Dick the Bruiser and the legendary Kiel Auditorium bordered on mythical to those of us who had only magazine photos to go on.

Today's promoters could benefit enormously from reading your account of how Muchnick treated the business and everyone involved. The behind-the-scenes politics has always fascinated me the most about wrestling. How and why things took place.

Granted, wrestling has and must change. As we get older, we have the tendency to wax nostalgic about the old days and make them out to be somehow better than they really were. But Mr. Muchnick has left a legacy well worth telling and you did him an honor in telling it very well.

WCW ought to consider running on a national scale the way St. Louis used to be run. They have the performers to do a more realistic, more competitive version of pro wrestling. If they could eliminate the nonsensical angles, the no-shows, all the run-ins and ref bump screw-job finishes, they might make a run at being No. 1. Certainly, they would distinguish themselves as being a totally different product from their opposition in a very positive way, far more than just having less abusive language and gestures.

Bill Gilger
Shamokin, Pennsylvania

DM: Times change and there is no way to transfer in its entirety things that were successful in 1979 into 1999. Wrestling today has to be sold as entertainment as opposed to fake sport, although it should have elements of both. Even today's real sports performers can't get over doing straight sports interviews the likes of which Muchnick's champions did. However, there are a lot of promotional concepts in regard to the company and announcers maintaining credibility, not overhyping, not lying to the fans (particularly lying when the truth makes as good a story), screwing the fans whether it be false advertising or on finishes and at least making the big title and the holder of it and the people chasing it a credible entity as opposed to simply another part of the sideshow that would all work today. Remember, that in Muchnick's day, no other wrestling promotion operated quite in his manner, and yet his was generally the most consistent drawing city in the country except New York and there is a huge population base difference in the two cities. His feeling was by not overhyping things, you may give up some business on the big show or for the short-term, but you don't lose credibility in the process and leaves you with more loyalty from your base audience because they never feel screwed. That seemed to work since his company with the one exception never had the down periods when people have been hyped to the point of numbness that plagued every other modern wrestling company.

MARCH 15, 1999

Japan's *Weekly Pro Wrestling* had more old memos from the Sam Muchnick collection in its multi-part history of the NWA feature. It was clear that after averting the split-up in 1961, apparently over the Sonny Myers lawsuit, that the NWA nearly fell apart again around 1963-64 during the last Lou Thesz reign. There was a bulletin on February 1, 1963 written by Muchnick, informing everyone of Thesz winning the title from Buddy Rogers and basically the pre-emptory strike as everyone knew what was coming next (formation of the WWWF with Rogers as champion). Muchnick wrote, "It is the duty of all members to recognize the Alliance champion in their advertising, promotion and publicity. There are some, who in all probability, will want to advertise someone else as champion, now that they have reaped the fruits of NWA advertising. If so, that is their prerogative, but if they do, they should tender their resignation to the NWA. That would be the decent thing to do." By the summer of 1964, Muchnick himself was contemplating disbanding the NWA. In a letter to Leroy McGuirk of Tulsa on June 15, 1964, he talked about the NWA as being a once strong organization but that interest of late had diminished greatly.

Muchnick was very disappointed that the NWA members voted unanimously to help raise money for the U.S. Olympic team for the 1964 Olympics and after the vote, very few members did anything. Muchnick wrote, "Believe me, interest has diminished so much that sometimes I wonder why I am taking it so seriously. There are other instances of lackadaisical attitudes. It gets very discouraging and sometimes I feel like dropping out of the picture, yet I know if I do that the Alliance will disintegrate because no one else takes the interest I have taken. The NWA has been a good thing for wrestling but whether it can continue under present conditions, I don't know. I don't want to be the one to start the ball rolling for dissolution, but, unfortunately, from what has transpired during the past few years, I think it is the thing to do. Maybe after a couple of years the fellows will realize just how much the NWA was helpful to our game and a re-organization could be made."

THE READERS PAGES

MUCHNICK/BABA

The recent deaths of Sam Muchnick and Giant Baba brought to an end an era. Muchnick and Baba promoted wrestling the way I think it should be promoted. They didn't believe in gimmicks and tried to make it as close to "real" as possible, which is a far cry from today's promoters.

When Muchnick promoted in St. Louis, he didn't have ladder matches or scaffold matches. He never had the NWA title change hands in a gimmick match. Could you imagine him having the title change hands when the challenger pinned the champion by using a forklift? It's ridiculous.

Could you imagine Muchnick having a clown like Mankind as his world champion? For all the praise he gets in the Observer, I think he's nothing more than a frustrated stunt man.

If he wants to do high-risk stunts, he should work in the movies. Falling through tables and jumping off the top of cages through tables has nothing to do with wrestling. In the old days, gimmick wrestlers were kept on the undercard, not made into world champions.

I wish someone with a lot of money would come along and promote wrestling the way it used to be. Of course that will probably never happen considering the fact Vince McMahon has already taken it beyond any sense of credibility.

Duane Mason

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

DM: History is great to learn from, but history's greatest lesson is that everything must change in wrestling or go stale. As said before, there are parts of the art form that have been lost and parts that have been gained with all the recent changes and the current scene necessitates changes being faster than ever before. Wrestling is whatever the public buys under the heading. There are no rules to what it is and isn't other than if a promoter is doing a concept that doesn't work, he won't last. If a promotion can be profitable running pure shoots, then that is a form of pro wrestling even if the most basic component of what we grew up with as pro wrestling, planned high spots and finishes, aren't part of the art form. If a promotion can be profitable with people jumping through tables and cutting each other up and doing no psychology and nor doing anything within the realm of believability, doing anything that takes athletic talent, that's still pro wrestling even if it wasn't wrestling some of us grew up with. Muchnick and Baba deserve a lot of praise for being great promoters for their day, and being more honest than almost all in

a dishonest profession. That doesn't make their style "right" for today, or the only correct style even if their day, and other styles "wrong," it just makes their style successful in the time and place it was presented in. There are concepts you can learn from both men's shows and adapt them to today's scene if done with the right people that would probably still be successful, but just because there are concepts they didn't do, particularly if they work as entertainment to today's audience even if they have no believability, doesn't make them wrong or not pro wrestling because if there's one thing today's promoters have proven is the mind set of the 70s and early 80s that if the general public doesn't believe it to be real, that the entire business would die, has turned out to be the biggest fallacy of all.

NOVEMBER 22, 1999

St. Louis wrestling, the mythical wrestling capital of the world in the 60s and 70s under Sam Muchnick, was revisited in a KPLR-TV special called "Wrestling at the Chase: A Look Back," on 11/6. The show drew tremendous local media interest, probably because the people in power in the local newspapers, TV stations and radio were of the age that they grew up with Sunday mornings watching wrestling, which in that market, duelled the NFL evenly for TV ratings points.

The one-hour show was produced by Randy Liebler and Tom Zupanci of KPLR-TV with help from long-time wrestling announcer and promotional assistant Larry Matysik, Muchnick's right-hand man during the final era of the show, which ran on the station from 1959 to 1984. From press clips, it was clear the show was a huge ratings hit, but it was in a day when ratings weren't the be all and end all of promoting wrestling. Very few tapes of the show are still in existence, so the show contained tapes only from the 1979 to 1983 era, mainly videotapes. Matysik had kept himself when he got a VCR, along with one old two inch tape from 1962 the original announcer, Joe Garagiola, was given by Muchnick when he left his job as wrestling announcer as a gift to seek what turned out to be fame and fortune as one of the most famous television personalities in the country during the 70s as a host of "The Today Show" alongside Hugh Downs and Barbara Walters every morning.

The show talked about the TV show through 1970 with a touch that was unique to the city, with the wrestling show being taped in the most exclusive hotel ballroom in the city, the Khorassan Room at the Chase Hotel. It remained in the Chase Hotel for the rest of its run, but moved to a TV studio for KPLR-TV and the atmosphere at that point became more like most of the studio wrestling shows that were popular in that era. The only clip perhaps still remaining of wrestling from the famed Khorassan Room era so fondly talked about was amazing. A packed house, in a 900-seat dinner theater, of a crowd that looked like they were seeing opera and not pro wrestling. Almost exclusively couples, despite the tapings actually being done on Sunday afternoons, all the men in suits and ties, some in tuxedos, and women in evening gowns, at dinner tables with the big chandeliers on the ceiling, sipping champagne while watching a pro wrestling television taping. The existence of the clip destroys virtually every media stereotype about what wrestling was, and what wrestling fans were, during those supposed dark days of wrestling in the early 60s. This was not what pro wrestling was anywhere else in those days (although in some markets where wrestling was particularly over during that time period, it wasn't unusual to see men in suits and ties throughout the crowd), a point made clear by the wrestlers as to why everyone wanted to work St. Louis, and why it was considered the wrestling capital of the world at the time. And there is almost no resemblance of that product to what it is today.

The show featured clips of men who had runs in the 70s as local television stars on the wrestling show, announcers Matysik and Mickey Garagiola, now in their 50s and still recognized by strangers regularly from the "good old days," local referees Lee Warren and Joe Schoenberger, and interviews from wrestlers Harley Race, Lou Thesz (who looks a good 25 years younger than his actual 83 years of age) and Ted DiBiase, with fond memories of the last place in the United

States where pro wrestling actually almost looked like and was promoted and treated like every other major sport with a few touches of showmanship and entertainment thrown in, playing before an audience considered the most respectful to the product in North America. The closest thing modern to compare it with would be All Japan at Budokan Hall.

When looking back at clips that were 16-20 years old, the most notable difference between that wrestling, which was top of the line in its period, and now, are the bodies. Steroids were already around in wrestling for more than a decade by that point, and were not exactly a rarity, but clearly their usage today is tenfold or a hundredfold what it was then. Even Ken Patera, who was an Olympic weightlifter who had to be far stronger at that point than just about any pro wrestler active today and had at the time one of the best physiques in wrestling, and who took steroids, in very small doses compared with today's wrestlers, doesn't even look all that physically impressive when compared with the HGH and insulin fed monsters of this era.

Memories often romanticize the past and sometimes videotape reality can be a cruel blow. The athletics in the ring really was no better than today. Many of today's wrestlers are, besides being obviously more muscular, are also quicker and more agile. The in-ring product was more solid and believable but didn't have today's spectacular moves. It was just done in a more serious setting. While people like Bruiser Brody, Ric Flair, DiBiase, Dick Murdoch, Gene Kiniski and Race would rank with the best performers today, only the former two had the look that would transcend eras that would have given them a shot at even being pushed in today's cosmetic based environment, which is almost the ignored sad fact you're left with after watching the show. DiBiase, a tremendous worker, would probably be dismissed as too skinny, although he was good enough in the ring and tall enough that he could have had a chance today if he fell into the right clique, and perhaps if he was around today and taking the same physique enhancing combinations today's wrestlers are, while his genetics still wouldn't give him the perfect look, he'd have at least been presentable to where his work and talking ability could carry him to the top. If he didn't have the right friends, he also may have been stuck as a much taller Eddie Guerrero. David Von Erich, a huge local draw, was even skinnier--a lot skinnier than even Kendall Windham. Race and Murdoch would be dismissed as having too big a belly and not having the star look. Kiniski would be considered, even by WCW standards, as being too old. And Dick the Bruiser at the end looked positively ancient, making today's Flair and Hogan look young. Yet they drew sellouts when matched against each other.

Joe Garagiola, who was a St. Louis Cardinals catcher of modest ability, got his first broadcasting job as Muchnick's wrestling announcer, but he was by no means a good wrestling announcer. The respect he had for Muchnick and fond remembrances of what some in the mainstream would feel is a part of his career that should be an embarrassment, a famous national broadcaster who started as a local wrestling announcer, were obvious in his interview as he was almost teary eyed remembering Muchnick and being involved with a local hit TV show. In fact, he jumped at the chance to come in from Phoenix to do the special, just as it was with everyone that appeared on the show including Bob Costas, who grew up as a fan of Muchnick's version of wrestling, even if he really didn't seem to grasp exactly what it was. Matysik, who hosted the show, was considered one of the best announcers of that era, in that Gordon Solie-esque way of broadcasting things seriously, like it was a sports event. While the bodies couldn't compare, in contrast when it comes to crowd heat and certainly emotion, today's product can't compare. When DiBiase pinned Race in a television tag team match, everyone in the audience was going crazy, jumping up and down in a manner never seen today except when Misawa scores the pin to end a Budokan show after going 30 minutes. There are sometimes bigger pops today, like when finally the Rock has returned to Cleveland, but they are more contrived by a business far more sophisticated in its manipulative abilities, and often devoid of any true emotion. They built the show largely around that tag match, which catapulted DiBiase into national stardom having scored a pinfall on the world champion, much as Flair was catapulted into national stardom in the same city when he first pinned Dory Funk Jr. in a St. Louis main event. Mickey Garagiola, the ring announcer, and Joe's younger brother, was so excited, having seen what he called

the greatest match of his life. It really today looked no different from any very good match today except for the level of intensity in the crowd, hanging on every move at the end, climaxing with such an impressive crowd pop for the finish of DiBiase, winning with a move now called a German suplex, that it would confuse people as to why unless they understood the context it was put into. They fans popped because the win meant something tangible, and not because the music was blaring so loudly in the background (there were no musical introductions in those days) and he was doing a dance in the ring. And at the count of two with the champ on his back, nobody turned sideways to look away from the ring and see who was doing the run-in. Garagiola, in the emotion, in his most embarrassing moment in wrestling, announced DiBiase as the winner and new world champion. He forgot that there was no way on Earth the world title could change hands in a tag team match. Of course, today it could.

And there was the sense of first-take realism, even in a taped show. During an angle when then-world champion Ric Flair was building up a match with Butch Reed, Reed, in street clothes, was challenged by Flair to an amateur wrestling confrontation. If you've ever seen the angle, you'd know in your sleep how it went. Reed embarrasses the world champion, who can't escape his ride, then easily escapes the champ's ride, and the champ, with the challenger in the down position for the second time, double-crosses him by putting the boots to him. Challenger comes back doing pro style and does a move while the ref counts three in a non-sanctioned match. But this was different. Reed, in street clothes, ripped his pants at the start of the angle. The sequence continued unabated, with nobody mentioning the obvious, nor for that matter, even one fan laughing at what today would be remembered as an impromptu comedic classic moment. If it had been brought up, and turned into comedy, it would have resulted in killing the house at the arena show this angle was designed to build. But fans were more into seeing Reed embarrass the world champion, and his ripping his pants in the process was immaterial. Oh yeah, the house wasn't killed, either.

It was also interesting to see Joyce Grable execute a move now called a power bomb, Debbie Combs use a move now called a rana, a very ordinary looking Wendi Richter in her first professional match and just plain women who looked like housewives out there wrestling. It wasn't particularly good wrestling even then, but obviously it was at a level far above what passes for mainstream women's wrestling today.

The lack of clips is just a testimonial to the fact that as popular as wrestling was in those days, nobody had the foresight to see some day these tapes would also be valuable, and the originals were all erased decades ago to save space in a storage room. The opening still photo montage and the respect everyone had for Muchnick, not just as a great wrestling promoter but as an honest man, was a clip that current promoters could commission and contrive and probably get on A&E or somewhere else when they get old, but none could ever get naturally, were the highlight. The reminiscence of, in particular Race and Mickey Garagiola, of their days in the sun, when everyone knew them in town and they were real celebrities, were the most charming.

The disappointment was we didn't see more of the stars of that day. A staggering percentage are dead, David, Fritz and Kerry Von Erich, John Studd (who looked so much smaller and had a little bit of agility, he was only slightly larger than DiBiase in a singles match, as compared to the stationary giant who made DiBiase look tiny that he played when putting the big lifts in his ring boots feuding with Andre in the WWF), Murdoch, Blackwell, Bruiser, Bob Brown, O'Connor and Brody among others, only a few of whom lived long enough to actually retire from wrestling. Because of this, the decision was made not to mention just how many had died young because it would have overwhelmed the show, although they did make mention of the early deaths of Brody and David Von Erich. But it was missing people like Dory Funk Jr., Flair (who according to an article in the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* "stiffed assistant producer and researcher Randy Liebler for an interview), Gene Kiniski and Johnny Valentine today to make it complete. Costas was the only one to offer a comparison with the modern McMahon product, talking about Muchnick promoting good vs. evil, and good always winning out and people leaving happy, which was funny since, while Muchnick did have babyfaces and heels, the line wasn't nearly as strong nor were the personalities so overplayed

as in every other promotion in the country at the time. Muchnick's babyfaces and heels were more like home and visiting team baseball players as opposed to soap opera based characters playing symbolic roles. Matysik noted that the style they promoted never truly died, as it was still drawing sellouts and big television ratings when Muchnick retired as promoter in 1982.

Actually, the true history was that the group which bought the promotion from Muchnick in 1982, tried to "modernize" it and make it more like the wrestling in the rest of the country, and by doing so, largely killed what made it so popular, and it started struggling until McMahon came in and bought the established time slot away from them. St. Louis was the first major city to be the site of the full scale all-out war. With one side giving people Flair vs. Brody and Flair vs. Kerry on one side, and the other side with Hogan on top with Andre, both companies were doing big business. But it didn't take long before that ended, and soon nobody could draw in the market. Eventually, the modern concepts took hold and whatever was hot everywhere else, or not hot was the same in St. Louis.

Costas asked viewers to look at the show and decide which version of wrestling was better. For a modern fan who wasn't around in the 70s or 80s, to see these clips, they'd recognize clearly by the talk of people on the show it was a very special period in their life. But because the atmosphere looked so primitive in comparison with the full blown stage productions of today, the truth is, without understanding the context it was presented in, they would also probably have a difficult time quite understanding why.

SEPTEMBER 16, 2002

Among the latest wrestling book releases is a history on what some would say was North America's best wrestling city, a two-volume set on St. Louis wrestling, covering 1930 through 1985. The people who do the newsletter "Whatever Happened To?" published a two-column record book on St. Louis Wrestling (Scott Teal, P.O. Box 2781, Hendersonville, TN 37077-2781).

This, like Teal's previously released and monumental work on the history of pro wrestling in Madison Square Garden, is mainly aimed at the few historian types and nostalgia market. It's mainly results from the major shows in the city. Records aren't complete, but they are pretty close to from 1930 through 1985 for the major shows promoted by Tom Packs, Lou Thesz, Muchnick, Larry Matysik and the St. Louis Wrestling Club. It doesn't cover WWF results in St. Louis from 1984-85 for some reason, even though St. Louis was an important early city, as it was the first major NWA stronghold that McMahon bought the existing television time (a practice he followed nationwide over the next year) and started promoting in opposition to the established company, starting in December, 1983, signalling the biggest wrestling war in history was beginning. Nor does it cover the city's all-time record crowd drawn in a blizzard for a Nitro during the WCW heyday at the TWA Dome, although that was way after 1985.

Looking back at St. Louis and the results and you pick up some things immediately. The booking was simple. The shows were probably most similar to today's All Japan Pro Wrestling. It was based on chasing a title that meant everything. Wins and losses, generally, but not always, led to higher or lower spots on the show. Wrestlers being programmed for a title program would begin the chase months in advance, generally starting a local winning streak. The show was largely sold based on the main event, which either meant something, or didn't on nights the shows didn't draw. The undercard was to build one or two new stars, and mainly just to fill out the show with good action and a lot of familiar faces, but never to steal the spotlight from the headliners.

The book doesn't have attendance figures for every show, or even as complete records in that regard as the MSG book. But there are enough to where you get a general feeling of the good, bad and average periods historically. Unlike people would reminisce, Muchnick didn't sellout every show, nor was he immune from bad periods, but he

did promote successfully for 40 years including battling through two major promotional wars for the city.

Dick Hutton, for example, was drawing less than 5,000 fans during his period as NWA champion from 1957-59, even when local favorites like Thesz or Pat O'Connor challenged him. Muchnick seemed to have two bad periods, early on when he first started promoting, and later, in the Hutton era, before the introduction of "Wrestling at the Chase" on KPLR-TV.

The latter, like Muchnick as a promoter, was the most unique pro wrestling television show in history. Taping took place in the most elegant ballroom in the city's highest class hotel. Joe Garagiola, who later became a network superstar, was the first announcer. The clientele of fans consisted of mainly married couples, between the ages of 35 and 55. The men were dressed in suits and ties. The women were in evening gowns. It looked more like a rich man's company formal Christmas party than an audience going to see Johnny Valentine and Dick the Bruiser. While the show blew all stereotypes of the wrestling audience to smithereens, the ratings were such that they went head-to-head with the NFL on Sundays and often beat it.

Thesz, who headlined on-and-off for 32 years, had both his great and bad periods as a draw. The best draws appeared to have been Bill Longson, and that was for Packs, and the period when Dory Funk Jr. was NWA champion for Muchnick. There is even a reprint of an article in the early 70s stating that Funk Jr. was the best drawing champion of the past 20 years.

It wasn't until around 1970 when Muchnick used his first manager, Heenan, and it was because Bruiser kept telling Muchnick how much Heenan added to Blackjack Lanza's drawing power. The book also doesn't talk about November 22, 1963 (the day John F. Kennedy was shot and Muchnick went on with his show, with no community backlash), or that Muchnick never pushed an African-American wrestler until March of 1966 with Ernie Ladd, who got over so well that a new audience started coming to the matches. Muchnick, unnerved by the fact his most well behaved audience in the world would have a new audience, would both never beat Ladd, and also never headline with him. Although once Ladd left for football season, Muchnick did use Sweet Daddy Siki and Bearcat Wright to maintain the new audience and even gave both of them main events before a few months were out. When Ladd came back after the season, he was still banging his head on the glass ceiling. The first volume, which starts with scattered coverage of shows dating back to 1883, but is pretty complete once you get to 1930, and ends in 1959. One of the most famous matches in history, the 1928 Jim Londos-Strangler Lewis match talked about last week in the Jack Curley bio, somehow slipped through the cracks. It features a forward by historian J. Michael Kenyon, romanticizing about Thesz, Muchnick and Packs and how wrestling was in that city in their day, calling it the golden age of wrestling. The Kenyon story noted that the freak attractions who drew elsewhere were used sparingly by both Packs and Muchnick. Muchnick did feature undercard women's matches starting in 1956, and in the early period when they were a novelty, actually booked them as high as second from the top. It was even noted that Andre the Giant actually only worked seven shows for Muchnick.

The second volume, covering 1960-85, is mainly results, some attendance figures and classic program reprints.

With Thesz, who was a supporter of the project, passing away a few months ago, as did Muchnick in 1999, and booker Pat O'Connor years earlier, what I'd have loved to have seen is more stories behind the matches. In particular, of the big money programs and why they drew, as opposed to just the list of the winning streaks leading to the matches. The big weakness was a lack of involvement of Matysik, who was Muchnick's right-hand man for 13 years, and booked the promotion in its later years and served as its TV announcer during Muchnick's best business period ever. He would have probably been to virtually all the shows from the early 60s on, knew what was going on behind-the-scenes certainly from a few years later and could have added a lot of depth to the results. That said, I'm glad somebody did

the project and there are people who will love it. Since so much of wrestling history is based on vague recollections, often by people who will shade the truth to their own benefit, record books for such a major wrestling city are a tremendous reference.

MARCH 10, 2003

Jack Brisco claimed that there were plans for a match at the Omni with himself, as NWA champion, against Bruno Sammartino, as WWWF champion, which would have been a 60:00 draw. He said that at the last minute, Vince McMahon Sr. decided against the match, and it ended up being Bob Backlund. There was a match on August 29, 1975 at the Omni with Brisco over Backlund. That it was Backlund would have been sheer coincidence historically, because the decision to make Backlund WWWF champion after going through Superstar Billy Graham as a lengthy transitional heel champion wasn't made until early 1977, when Sammartino was wanting to slow down his schedule even more. Jim Barnett, who promoted the Omni in those days, doesn't remember any plans for such a match or for Sammartino to work anything high profile in Atlanta. He did give background on the July 4, 1982 title vs. title match at the Omni with Ric Flair, as NWA champion, facing Backlund, which went to a double count out. Because Vince Sr. wasn't running any shows on that holiday weekend, he went to Barnett and asked for a few of his bigger stars to get work on an Omni show, including Backlund. The upside of getting guys to work the Omni meant they also got national exposure on TBS with clips to build up the match, and they even did a TV studio confrontation with Flair and Backlund in the old TBS studios talking about who the real champion was. That ended up being something of a double-cross on Senior, as he asked (which happened often in those days when he booked Backlund outside his territory except in St. Louis) for Backlund to wrestle one of his guys, but instead, Ole Anderson booked the dream match because he thought it would draw. By the time word got back, it was already announced and they all agreed to just bite the bullet. I believe the match drew about 9,000 fans, which was considered a disappointment, because Backlund hadn't wrestled in Atlanta in years, and Backlund in the ring was not in the same league with most of Flair's opponents at the time, so the match was good, but not great. Barnett didn't even like the idea of the match because he didn't like draws in main events unless they were to build something for a rematch.

MARCH 31, 2003

Another follow-up from some months back, there was definitely talk of a Jack Brisco vs. Bruno Sammartino title vs. title match in Atlanta, which would have been in 1975, so Brisco's story about Backlund being the replacement makes sense. Others involved in decision making during that time period have vague recollections of people trying to put it together. There was also serious talk, although I'm not certain how far it got, in late 1973, to do a Brisco vs. Pedro Morales match. There was also at least one more title vs. title match with the WWWF champ vs. NWA champ not mentioned, as there was a Harley Race vs. Bob Backlund match in early 1978 in Jacksonville. It was actually billed as the Super Bowl (the Miami match) rematch with Race vs. Graham, but Graham lost the title before the match and Backlund took his place. Also, in the Backlund-Graham title change at MSG, in fact, Backlund didn't attack Graham's leg. When Graham didn't limp, Backlund never went near the leg

From Dory Funk on the 1973 incident when he was champion with the ranch accident that took place two days before he was to drop the title to Brisco in Houston. "The business is a work. The accident was real. The pickup truck accident occurred on Wednesday afternoon on the Flying Mare Ranch in Umbarger, TX owned by my father, Dory Funk Sr. We were moving cattle from the plateau down to the government lease valley below. Terry and my father were on foot and I was in the pickup truck. The herd broke toward Sierra Blanca Creek, and in the truck I pursued, watching the cattle. With my eyes on the cattle, I

plunged down a six foot drop into the creek. An ambulance was called and I was pulled from the icy waters and taken to Neblett Hospital in Canyon. It was early spring, but I remember a thin coat of ice on the water. On Friday, March 2, 1973, my father received calls from Fritz Von Erich and Sam Muchnick to see if there was some way I could walk in the ring and complete the performance. I had 17 stitches in my face and a dangling right arm that I couldn't lift from my side. All the plans of Jack Brisco, Muchnick, Eddie Graham, Von Erich, Paul Boesch and the NWA Board of Directors were upset. Nobody even bothered to ask how I was doing. In those days, there was no medical insurance available to professional wrestlers and naturally no worker's benefits in the wrestling business. Just as the above mentioned had to be upset because it interfered with their plans to make money, I was also upset, suffering two months loss of work, medical expenses and cost our family business (the Amarillo wrestling territory) and myself lots of money, not to mention the loss of my father's pickup truck."

JULY 18, 2011

Last week was the 95th anniversary of one of the most famous and talked about matches in pro wrestling history, the nearly five hour draw between two of the biggest stars of the first half of the 20th century, Ed "Strangler" Lewis and the person considered in many circles as the top man in the game at the time, Joe Stecher, on July 4, 1916, in Omaha.

With Frank Gotch, the biggest star in pro wrestling for the prior decade, fading from the scene, it was Lewis and Stecher who went on to become the biggest stars in the game for the next dozen or so years. Both were reputedly upper echelon shooters. So much of that was based in those days on things like gym reputation, the ability to control word-of-mouth among wrestlers and the ability to manipulate the media, so anytime anyone says anything definitive on that account needs to be taken with a skeptic's eye. Suffice to say, who was the best, or near the best in that era would be all speculation, and looking at match results, or for that matter, who had the most offense or got the best newspaper write-ups is irrelevant since almost every match by that point in time was worked.

What has made this match so well remembered historically, was both the idea it was not a work (and it likely wasn't), the length of the match (which legend for years had it going six hours), and that it involved two men who would go on to be the biggest names in wrestling of their era. Even this past week in a poll we did on the most famous pre-1950 match in history, it finished third, behind only the two Gotch vs. George Hackenschmidt matches in 1908 and 1911.

Lewis became the enduring star of the era, who remained a major public figure during the first television era of the 50s when he was the advance man, manager, traveling partner and real-life mentor for world champion Lou Thesz. At that point, Lewis was the guy who would be in the media, putting over Thesz like he was the real deal, and the sports people flocked to him because, even though it wasn't the case, Lewis' world titles in the 20s were seen as real and he was believed to have been the greatest in an era where wrestling was still real sport. He would talk up his six hour draw with Stecher, which became larger than life, similar to Helio Gracie's lengthy matches in BJJ history. In time, it became accepted fact that Lewis was on the verge of winning when it was declared a draw, because aside from those in the arena in Omaha, nobody saw it, and Lewis was great with the media and remained a public figure well into the 50s. Stecher, on the other hand, suffered a nervous breakdown and was largely out of public life by the end of the 1920s, retired to his farm in Dodge, IA.

Even though all accounts of the match when it actually took place were that it was terrible, that would actually to a degree corroborate the legend of it being at least in some form authentic, as years went by it became the ultimate shoot between all-time greats that was used as a measuring stick.

Plus, as bad as the match was, outside of Omaha, where it took place and where it was so bad the mayor held up both men's purse, it was talked of like it was a classic and led to a number of rematches. The two men had 19 major singles matches against each other, most positioned as either for the world heavyweight title, or a key match to determine someone getting the next title shot. Others credited shooting matches like this not being spectator friendly as being the reason pro wrestling became worked, but that is clearly not the case because pro wrestling was virtually all worked long before 1916.

In his book, "Hooker," Lou Thesz, a protege and best friend of Lewis, talked about how Lewis and Stecher did three legitimate matches that went a combined 11 hours.

"Virtually all of those minutes were spent warily stalking each other or locked together, almost unmoving, sometimes briefly on the mat. They were tremendous contests, but they had to be absolute boredom for the average paying customer to watch."

In the end notes of the new book, author Kit Bauman said that press at the time indicated that the three matches in question actually lasted a combined nine hours, and the third of these matches, held in Madison Square Garden, was almost certainly a worked match. I can find records of two Stecher vs. Lewis matches in MSG, an April 26 1918, bout that sold out the building and went to a 90 minute draw, and a rematch on November 3, 1919, with George Bothner as referee, that Stecher won in 91 minutes, which was clearly a worked match because it was done to set up the January 30, 1920, classic title match where world champion Earl Caddock lost the title to Stecher and did a gate of nearly \$80,000, a record that stood for that part of the country until the days of Bruno Sammartino. Caddock-Stecher has been reputed to be a shoot, and there actually is footage that has survived from that period. It is either a shoot or an amazingly well worked match since there are no holes, and stylistically it is completely different from other worked matches of that era.

At that point in time, Gotch was still the biggest name in wrestling. While he wrestled after 1913, he had largely retired as a full-time wrestler that year after a win over George Lurich. His health was failing, as he passed away less than 18 months later from uremic poisoning (or syphilis as has long been rumored) at the age of 39.

The heir apparent to the throne as America's superstar wrestler seemed to be Stecher, a national amateur champion who was put over from the start of his pro career as someone unbeatable, beating almost everyone in two straight falls up to that point in time.

The rivalry dated back a year earlier. On July 5, 1915, Stecher won a version of the world title from Charley Cutler, in Omaha, before 15,000 fans. Gotch was actually at the show. Both Lewis and Earl Caddock helped train Cutler for the match. This set up interest in Gotch vs. Stecher as the big match. Some believe had the match happened, with Stecher being put over Gotch on his way out, that it would have greatly helped the industry. By never beating Gotch, Stecher was never fully accepted as world champion and no real transition from legend-to-legend was made, that would have established Stecher as the new superstar to the average person. Gotch was among the most famous athletes of his time. Stecher, while also relatively well known among sports fans in that era, never came close to reaching Gotch's level. Wrestling later boomed during the 20s, with Lewis as the dominant star.

Stecher and Lewis first met for the title on October 21, 1915, in Evansville. The match went two hours, with Lewis stalling and refusing to lock up, which would indicate the match may have been legitimate, although the finish would tell you otherwise. The idea of people doing a crowd-unfriendly shoot for two hours, killing the town, and then working a finish, makes no sense on the surface, but there were plenty of different variants of working and shooting in those days. A lot of the money made in the sport was based on gambling and manipulating people to bet a certain way and then cleaning up.

According to a biography on Lewis written by Steve Yohe, Lewis blocked all of Stecher's offense, but did no offense of his own. Stecher shot for takedowns and Lewis was able to sprawl and got behind him, but Lewis would let Stecher back up as opposed to working to finish him from that position. Then he would stall in the standing position. At about the two hour mark, Stecher went for another takedown and Lewis didn't have the room to sprawl, and instead fell out of the ring and hit his head on a chair. Manager Billy Sandow told the referee he was injured and couldn't continue. The ringside doctor disagreed saying he could continue. The referee, Bert Sisson, gave Stecher the first fall. In those days, they had a 15 minute rest period between falls where both competitors went back to the dressing room and rested up. Two other doctors examined Lewis and said there was no reason he couldn't continue. But he didn't come out for the second fall and Stecher was awarded the win and retained his championship. The newspaper reports at the time indicated most watching it felt that Stecher would have eventually won, even to the point of saying there was no doubt about the eventual outcome.

But the mayor of Evansville, at the show, thought something was amiss. He got in the ring after the match, said the match was not on the square and had the Chief of Police hold up the gate and said it would be given to charity. The police claimed they had gotten telegraphs and phone messages telling them there was going to be a fake wrestling match. Lewis went to the hospital with a minor groin injury. Lewis and Stecher were never paid for the match.

Yohe theorized that because Stecher had beaten everyone quickly, and that at the time, fans didn't believe Lewis could beat him, that the real story behind this match is Lewis' side bet heavily based on the idea Lewis would last two hours with Stecher, when nobody up to that point had lasted 30 minutes. While they may not have been confident Lewis could beat Stecher in a shoot, with his great defensive skills, the idea was he could last as long as he had to, and as soon as he had to was over, he willingly lost the match. But there are so many holes in every story such as if they were working and agreed to a finish, Stecher had to know, and the referee should have known. The police being told about and being concerned about a fake wrestling match makes no sense since all but a small percentage of wrestling matches of that era were worked.

However, while this match hurt Evansville, the promotional ability of Lewis and manager Billy Sandow was such that it helped the feud on a national basis and made Lewis into a national star. They would tell reporters from other cities about the classic match where he was getting the better of Stecher for two hours, and they even claimed the match ended as a draw or a no contest and not a Lewis loss. Thus, when Lewis arrived in New York a few weeks later, he was considered the No. 1 contender for the world title.

The big rematch was in Omaha, drawing 18,000 fans outdoors for the rematch, the second biggest crowd up to that point in North American wrestling history, behind only Gotch vs. George Hackenschmidt in Chicago in 1911. The match was set for a 4 p.m. start with the idea by starting that early, someone would beat the other.

Lewis again was on the defensive and little happened in the fight. Stecher was even more wary in this fight than in Evansville, as he wouldn't even shoot for a takedown to allow Lewis to get behind him. Several times during the match, Stecher went to the down position and invited Lewis to ride him. This would indicate a worked match because you would never voluntarily do that in a shoot match, particularly against an opponent you are wary of. But again, the question becomes, if you were doing a worked match, why would you kill the city, particularly with such a huge crowd, by having a terrible bout? And if the idea was to swindle locals gambling on a fight by taking bets of how long the fight will last, then both guys should be in on it, and if they were, why was the match so bad.?

At 8 p.m., it started to get dark. Promoter Gene Melady proposed that they stop the match and continue it the next morning, giving them all day to come to a decisive winner. It was said Stecher agreed, but Lewis and manager Billy Sandow felt any kind of a break would benefit

Stecher and wanted to finish it that night, saying it was advertised as going to the finish. As it got dark out, cars were driven to surround the ring with their headlights put on, because the stadium they were playing in didn't have lights. It continued with nothing happening, including fans throwing seat cushions into the ring trying to prod both guys into action. Finally, the match was called and ruled a draw.

Once again, local authorities held up both men's purse, although unlike in Evansville, they did get paid when Sandow threatened to file suit. Both wrestlers were blamed for the match, but in Nebraska, more of the blame fell on Lewis because Stecher was the aggressor and also came in as the babyface and was the home town wrestler. For the rest of his career, Lewis was always a heel in Omaha.

There are once again a wide variety of theories as to what this was. Lewis being defensive and Stecher being afraid to be offensive would indicate either a shoot, or two guys who didn't trust each other and were afraid to work or put themselves in any kind of a jeopardizing position for fear the other would double-cross. Once again, the idea is Lewis was stalling out time because people in Nebraska bet on Stecher winning within a certain time frame. But if that's the case, then the match would be a shoot, because if they were trying to swindle bettors, they would agree to go a certain length and at least make it entertaining. The idea that they couldn't do moves that weren't legit because of all the gambling is sound. But both men worked enough matches to look like a shoot in their day. They should have been able to do that type of a match with each other and having it, maybe not be mainstream entertaining, but at least not being horrible and town killing.

Still, to everyone but those fans who were in Omaha, it became one of the legendary matches in history, two of the all-time greats, in their prime going five or six hours, depending on how far the exaggeration had gotten, in a classic match.

"We wrestled five hours without either of us securing a fall," said Lewis at the time to reporters, spinning the story of it being a classic, and how even though it was a draw, he was on the verge of winning. "At the end of the bout, which was halted by the referee, Stecher appear to be all in. His pulse was 125, and according to those who witnessed the encounter, he could not have stood the strain ten minutes longer. I offered Stecher a return match but he refused to accept it, saying he was through wrestling with me. I cannot account for his statement, as I always gave him a square deal in every one of our matches."

Three years later, as Lewis' star was shining, Sandow talked about the match.

"Three years ago, Stecher was hardly known outside of Omaha. He had, however, thrown every man he had met inside of 15 minutes. Out that way he was thought unbeatable and they said the man didn't live who could stay half an hour with him. Charlie Cutler, the American champion, had gone 25 minutes with him, and next to Joe, of course, he was called the second wonder of the world, in Omaha. I finally arranged a match between Lewis and Stecher, it was three years ago last summer.

"They met in the open air under a broiling Nebraska sun. The bout started at 1:30, and at 7 p.m., after five-and-a-half hours of wrestling, without either man being off his feet once, folks began to run automobiles up to the ring so that they could throw their headlights on the men, and they might see each other. At this late day they were just beginning to realize what a great match that was. Now, but they didn't then. They held Lewis's money up for four days on the grounds that there was something shady with the match. They couldn't believe that a mortal man could stay beyond a half an hour with their Joe. To show the stuff that the Strangler's made of, let me add that Lewis took a shower, had a light supper and danced until 4:30 the next morning. Ed Smith refereed the bout and he'll never forget it, or the heat either."

The two were major opponents for each other for the next several years, until they became the key wrestler for rival camps, at which point they became the ultimate dream match that couldn't take place.

Eventually, Lewis, Sandow and Toots Mondt became key players in the business with Lewis becoming the biggest star and world champion. Stecher became a top star for promoters largely on the outs. When Lewis was world champion in 1925, he dropped the title to a giant football player named Wayne Munn, largely to set up a rematch that was expected to be one of the biggest matches ever. Along the way, Munn was to defend the title against everyone but Lewis, and continuing to win as champion to build the showdown of the greatest wrestler against the unbeatable giant.

However, Munn was double-crossed by aging shooter Stanislaus Zbyszko, who was in the Lewis stable as a regular opponent of his. Zbyszko, who was one of Gotch's big rivals, put over Munn big in a previous match. Zbyszko never did jobs through 1922, but at this point had been booked to lose 11 major matches in a row to Lewis. Zbyszko may have cut a deal with the Stecher side before his title challenge to Munn on April 15, 1925, where he was supposed to job on their way to Munn vs. Lewis seven weeks later. Instead, Zbyszko shot on Munn and beat him in two straight falls.

While one would think Zbyszko would have been blackballed out of wrestling for such a stunt, the reality was the opposite. Promoters were thrilled they could get the world champion without dealing with Sandow and Lewis and their asking price of a high percentage of the gate. Many of the top promoters were making him big offers. Zbyszko, who was either 45 or 47 at this time, didn't draw as champion, but got paid \$50,000, a ridiculous amount of money at that time, by a group that included Stecher, and brother Tony Stecher, to drop the title to Stecher in two straight falls on May 30, 1925, in St. Louis.

Lewis' side was able to get some states not to recognize the Zbyszko win and subsequent loss to Stecher. Lewis beat Munn, which still drew big, although nowhere close to what it would have done had Munn been champion. With the win, Lewis' crew billed him as world champion, but most knew Stecher had beaten Munn first and he was considered the real champion. They used the excuse that Munn went into the match with Zbyszko with a high fever, or tonsillitis, trying to somehow invalidate that unplanned finish. Lewis and Mann became regular opponents on big shows for the next year or so, with Lewis always winning. Promoters would offer big money for Lewis vs. Stecher, but first Stecher refused, and then when he publicly changed his tune, Lewis refused.

Finally the sides came to an agreement for a February 20, 1928, match in St. Louis, the first time the two men would have met for six years or more. Stecher, who had been the victim of at least two attempted double-crosses, one by Joe Malciewicz (he walked out on that since Malciewicz was not his announced opponent) and another by John Pesek (Pesek had Stecher in a submission but Stecher was saved by the referee thinking on his feet and disqualifying Pesek, who actually was pretty much blacklisted out of the business for months for that stunt). The match was pushed as if it was a shoot, and both men went into training camps to give that idea credibility. Lewis, usually 240 or more by that time, cut to 217.

People came from all over the country to see the last great shoot to determine the real world champion and top man in the sport. Among those at the match were the Mayor, two state senators, more than 50 reporters, many of the biggest stars in wrestling and virtually all the major promoters. But it wasn't a shoot. Stecher wanted out of wrestling, and was willing to lose the title to his rival for a big payoff. Stecher retired to his home in Dodge, IA.

While Munn was not the last big football player or non-wrestler to get the world title, nor the last time there was a double-cross in a world title match, the failure of the Munn title reign due to the double-cross led to a mentality among promoters that they wanted the world champion to be a real shooter so if there was an attempt at a double-cross, they

had a guy who would at least not be a sitting duck for it. Munn wasn't the only case, as there was the example of Gus Sonnenberg being beaten up on a busy street as world champion that embarrassed the profession, as well as Dick Shikat hooking super draw Danno O'Mahoney and taking the title a decade later. Yet, historically over the next few decades, there were still plenty of world champions who were not top notch legitimate wrestlers.

But it was that mentality that led to Lou Thesz having such a long reign as NWA champion, because he could both draw and have the aura of a champion, but also he could carry the belt legit because of the idea most felt he was legit. Since the NWA champion defended his title worldwide, as opposed to working for one promotion, the fear of a renegade wrestler or promoter looking to embarrass the organization or champion existed in a way that it wouldn't have for a world champion who only worked for one office.

If you look at the NWA champions during the Sam Muchnick era, all were people who had reputations as tough guys. Thesz's reputation was as both a wrestler and a hooker, an expert on submissions. While Whipper Billy Watson was a performer and not a shooter, his title run was short, because Thesz was looking for a break. Dick Hutton was, even in the opinion of Thesz himself, a better wrestler than Thesz, which was why Thesz hand-picked him to drop the title. But Hutton wasn't charismatic and didn't draw as champion. Thesz did lose to Edouard Carpentier, a title switch that fell apart when Carpentier's promoter, Eddie Quinn, had a falling out with the NWA and Muchnick. So that was an instance where the NWA was willing to go with a gymnast and not a wrestler as champion, because Carpentier was huge box office at the time. Pat O'Connor was an amateur champion and probably the most underrated worker of the post-television era. Buddy Rogers, who Thesz refused to drop it to even though the leading promoters wanted him to, was one of the all-time great heels and draws, but was not considered a tough guy. And Thesz's getting the title from Rogers was partially based on the idea that Thesz, who was 46 at the time, had a reputation that would instill fear in Rogers and keep him from not losing. Rogers himself believed as much, and from his own mouth, when Thesz told him in the ring at the start of their match, "We can do this the easy way or the hard way," Rogers wasn't the slightest bit defiant and did it the easy way.

While Gene Kiniski, Dory Funk Jr., Terry Funk and Harley Race did not have national championships in wrestling, all were considered tough guys during their primes. Kiniski was a very good amateur, and a huge man. The Funk brothers were sons of Dory Funk Sr., a real life shooter even though he was really only a junior heavyweight, and while both were football players growing up, they were trained in wrestling. Terry did policeman work for the promotion, and Dory may have as well. Race had a reputation as a tough street fighter from his youth. Jack Brisco was a national collegiate champion who, had he come along today, would have likely been an Olympic hopeful. It really wasn't until Ric Flair in 1981 that the idea of the champion being a shooter or street fighter for fear of the double cross was no longer a factor in picking the king.

Thesz was tested a few times, most notably by Paul Boesch and Kintaro Oki, and in both cases, he lived up to his reputation under fire. With Boesch, the later day Houston promoter sucker punched Thesz and knocked him silly. Thesz was hurt so badly he had to stay near the ropes, go on the defensive, until he shook the cobwebs out. When he did, he tied Boesch up in a move that today would be called the STF. Boesch tried to get to the ropes as Thesz put pressure on the move. Thesz never went into detail about how he handled the situation. Boesch, who ended up in later years being good friends with Thesz, ranked him as the single greatest world champion he ever saw. Boesch once told me about how he did something he shouldn't have done in a match with Thesz. Thesz put him in this hold that was painful and he needed to get to the ropes since Thesz wasn't playing around. As he tried to squirm, Thesz whispered in his ear, "Paul, as far as you're concerned, those ropes are a mile away."

With Oki, a noted gym shooter in his day, as silly as this sounds, the Japanese either sent him, or as a rib told him, to double-cross Thesz in

a match in Houston and to take the title, and he'd return to Japan and it would elevate him to being the biggest star in both Japan and South Korea. He came after Thesz, and ended up going out on a stretcher.

JULY 20, 2011

Since it's Hall of Fame season (ballots go out in a few weeks with the issue in September), a new twist I wanted to look at this year is the major championship in the industry for a quarter-century, the history of the National Wrestling Alliance world heavyweight championship.

What I'm looking for is the number of championship matches the top challengers had during the year. This number does not necessarily prove who the best drawing cards or best wrestlers were in any given year, but to an extent it gives an indication of this much--the guys with the most title matches inherently were guys who were held in high regard for their ability to draw and to also have good main event title matches. What I'm looking for is long-term consistency on top and if there are names that come across stronger as Hall of Fame candidates because of it.

There are a number of flaws with this type of listing. The first is that the NWA champion didn't always spend most of his time in the hottest territories. For example, even when Vincent James McMahon was an NWA member, he relied on his own people to draw, and didn't adopt the philosophy of so many promoters of building everything around the NWA title as the ultimate prize, since the world champion wasn't a regular. He built around the WWWF (later WWF) title, and actually because of promoting in major arenas and having long-term champions, Vince Sr. did a better job of promoting his championship than all but the best of the NWA promoters.

Similarly, wrestlers who frequented territories the world champion appeared in will fare better than wrestlers in territories he didn't. Another example is Roy Shire, who was not an NWA member until 1968, but was one of the leading promoters, but he revolved around his own U.S. championship as the ultimate prize, and very rarely used the world champion, because he didn't see the need in paying 13% of his gate (10% to the champion, 3% to the NWA office as a booking fee) when he was drawing fine with his own stable and championship.

I believe from 1970 through 1973, strong years, he never once booked the NWA champion, and when Jack Brisco was brought in during 1974 for a few shots against Moondog Mayne, the U.S. champion, it was always said in the buildup that Mayne's championship was just as important as Brisco's. During the heyday of Ray Stevens, even though the biggest stars in the business at the time were flown in to be his opponent (and world champion Pat O'Connor was actually brought to the Cow Palace even though Shire was not an NWA member, that's how hot the Cow Palace was at the time, to work underneath Stevens), he never received an NWA title match. During the heyday of the Los Angeles promotion, it often had its own world title. Later, while the champion appeared more frequently there than in San Francisco, it wasn't like many territories where the champion came in seemingly every other month, and most of the time the Americas' title was promoted like it was the main prize with the world title rarely mentioned.

The other is that records are incomplete. There is The Great Hise web site that lists world title matches that we are using as the source. For example, in the year 1951, there are listings for 158 championship matches for Lou Thesz. One would suspect that is the sizeable majority of those matches, but there's a minimum of about 15% and perhaps as much as 25 to 35% of matches during that or any given year that there are no remaining records of. But the site has more than enough to get a strong general idea of who was getting multiple title shots. Plus, your true top contenders were the type of wrestlers who would be brought in by promoters for a title shot, because at any given time historically your biggest stars were in demand throughout the country based on their names.

The term National Wrestling Alliance world heavyweight champion dates back to 1940 and Orville Brown as champion, based in Iowa. It wasn't until Brown in 1946 went on a tour of Montana that the championship was defended outside the state. In 1948, at a meeting of a number of promoters in Waterloo, IA, the famous version of the NWA was formed. And the NWA didn't really become what one would call the dominant wrestling championship in the industry until 1949, when rival promoters Sam Muchnick (the NWA member) and Lou Thesz (who had been the world champion of the National Wrestling Association, which was a championship recognized by a collection of athletic commissions) merged in St. Louis.

Largely through their efforts, the champion was generally considered the top guy in the sport until the 1984 national expansion of Vincent Kennedy McMahon's World Wrestling Federation and the ascension of Hulk Hogan. But even then, during the 60s, and again in the 70s, the then-WWWF champion Bruno Sammartino was a bigger draw most years than the NWA champions, and the WWWF champion worked in the big Northeast markets in front of larger crowds. Nick Bockwinkel was once approached by Fritz Von Erich in the late 70s about being the NWA champion, and he said at the time he was making \$150,000 per year as AWA champion working 15 dates a month in a territory. He figured he could make \$350,000 a year as NWA champion but would never be home, and felt the difference wasn't worth it.

Vincent James McMahon, the main promoter of the WWWF, withdrew from the NWA in 1963 when, in a power struggle, Thesz was brought back as champion. Many alliance members were unable to get dates on champion Buddy Rogers, who was booked by the Capital Wrestling office of McMahon and Toots Mondt. It got so bad that several NWA promoters created their own world champions because they couldn't get Rogers into their territory and things got so mad that there were letters Muchnick sent to other promoters during that period saying that maybe it was time to give up on the alliance because it wasn't worth the headaches. But a few years later, the alliance was the strongest it ever was.

There were really two periods of NWA strength, the 1949 to 1957 period, when Thesz was generally recognized almost everywhere as the real world champion, and again from 1968 through 1983, when Muchnick was able to get a number of key territories back into the Alliance. McMahon's territory rejoined the alliance in 1971, although that was largely kept quiet from the public. McMahon still had his WWWF champion (who was referred to as WWWF champion in the 70s as opposed to world champion, as Sammartino was called in the 60s, although nobody really knew the difference and it was all semantics). For the first several years, McMahon never booked the champion or acknowledged the existence of another title on his TV until bringing in Harley Race for some Madison Square Garden shots in the late 70s.

It was in late 1983 at the NWA meeting when Vincent James McMahon, his son, the current Vince McMahon (who had purchased controlling interest from his father largely by raising \$250,000, and then using the profits from the company to pay a remaining \$750,000 in several installments--essentially the former partners like Phil Zacko, Vince Sr., Arnold Skaaland and Gorilla Monsoon were paid from their own pockets the way Sr. and Jr. structured the deal putting Jr. in charge) and Jim Barnett, the former NWA champion booker who had been hired on by them as Director of Operations, all withdrew.

The power fell from 1958 to 1960, when Dick Hutton and Pat O'Connor did not draw well as champion on their own.

The AWA title was created in 1960 when Verne Gagne purchased a controlling interest in the Minneapolis Boxing & Wrestling Club from Tony Stecher (the brother of Joe Stecher). Gagne had all the credentials to be world champion. He had become a national star through network television in the early 50s. He was legit, being a two-time NCAA champion. He was a very good, some would say great worker, old enough to have years of credibility as a superstar nationally and even internationally, but still in his prime. In hindsight, Gagne

would have probably been a better draw as champion than either Hutton or O'Connor.

However, during the 50s, there was a conflict in Chicago, where, because of political pressure, NWA champion Thesz worked dates for a rival Chicago promoter of Fred Kohler and Barnett. They were mad about it, and Kohler and Barnett, who had the key national television, decided to stop using Thesz in protest. Instead, they created the United States television championship as their key title. They made Gagne as champion, and with their television, would book him out to promoters around the country for the same 10% of the gate that Thesz and the NWA were charging. While Thesz was considered by the fans as "the real world champion," Gagne had the advantage of being featured on television and ended up in big demand.

The alliance, and Thesz in particular, felt Gagne had undercut them and hurt their bookings, and thus Gagne was never considered for the NWA world title even though he had every qualification. He was known nationally, had the right look, was a great worker and had the athletic background and legitimate wrestling ability that they wanted the champions of that era to have.

Gagne created a storyline on his television in 1960 that O'Connor was being given 90 days to defend his title against Gagne, the No. 1 contender. Some noted Gagne had beaten Edouard Carpentier, who had won the NWA title from Thesz (this happened but was erased from history when Carpentier's promoter, Eddie Quinn, withdrew from the NWA and refused to book Carpentier like a champion because he wanted him in his territory three days every week). It was noted Gagne's record as a top star, and it had been years since Gagne had received a title shot. It was said that if O'Connor didn't defend it, he'd be stripped of it.

Of course, O'Connor had nothing to do with any of this, and when the 90 days were up, Gagne was declared the AWA world heavyweight champion. The title was originally recognized mostly in Minnesota (an offshoot was recognized in Nebraska), but over the years, the AWA expanded into Milwaukee, Chicago, Denver, Winnipeg and all points in between.

The WWA title, in California, was created when Carpentier came in as world champion in 1960, with the claim he had won the title from Thesz, and dropped it to Fred Blassie. What gave that title prestige is early on, Blassie beat former NWA champions Thesz and Hutton. Muchnick struck a deal with the Los Angeles office in 1968 to return to the NWA.

The WWWF title came in 1963, when McMahon Sr. didn't want Rogers to drop it to Thesz. The Toronto date was either the second or third attempt at a title change. Rogers claimed a broken ankle in a match with Killer Kowalski on November 21, 1962. In that match, Rogers claimed the injury early in the first fall, and lost the fall, and couldn't continue. They ruled Kowalski was not the champion because he didn't win two out of three, which was pretty embarrassing but it was really because the board hadn't approved of Kowalski to be the champion. Thesz had been scheduled to win it a few days later. Kowalski did pick up a lot of Rogers dates until Rogers returned on January 3, 1963, and three weeks later was the earliest they could get he and Thesz together.

Rogers then quickly lost the title to Sammartino on May 17, 1963, in 47 seconds with an over the shoulder backbreaker submission. This was not a shoot match, but like with Thesz, Sammartino at the start did tell Rogers that there better not be any funny business and hoisted him up right away. The idea of a 47 second main event, let alone title change, was hardly the mindset in those days, but it ended up kicking Sammartino's run off in a dynamic way because of the legend of winning the fastest world title change match in history.

Sammartino held the WWWF title for more than seven years before he asked out as champion because of the schedule. The NWA was aware of this title change according to most sources, and before

Sammartino's win over Rogers, Thesz beat Sammartino in a match in Toronto. It should be noted Sammartino disputes this story. He said his title win and decision regarding him beating Rogers wasn't made when he had his NWA title shot at Thesz in Toronto on March 14, 1963, nine weeks before his WWWF title win.

At the time, Stanley Weston ran the most prominent wrestling magazines, and Vince Sr. asked him to pretend that the Thesz-Rogers title change in Toronto never happened. Weston didn't do it, which started an underlying feud between Weston and McMahon. McMahon tried to then say it shouldn't count as a title change because it was only one fall, and not two out of three, but he got undercut on that excuse when the NWA brought back a Thesz vs. Rogers rematch, a two of three fall match on February 7, 1963 in Toronto, which Thesz won again. McMahon then responded by ignoring Thesz, and instead of saying Rogers was still champion, talked about a new title being created in a tournament in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where Rogers beat Argentina Rocca in the finals, to become the World Wide Wrestling Federation world heavyweight champion. It was the first time the WWWF initials were used.

McMahon and Weston did work together because each needed the other, but it festered and was one of many reasons in 1984, when Vince Jr. created his own magazine, that he banned Weston's magazine from having any access to talent. That's why Weston's magazines, known in those days as the Apter Mags because the most prominent writer and photographer was Bill Apter, were so heavily in the NWA/Crockett side during the early years of the wrestling war.

There are also two key matches that never happened that are historically huge during the NWA's prime period. In 1949, with the merger in St. Louis, a wrestling hotbed since the 20s because Tom Packs had made pro wrestling such an important part of the local culture, the two world champions, Brown and Thesz, were to meet in a unification match on November 25, 1949. Brown was scheduled to win the match, which showed the power of the new alliance vs. the old alliance in that they would get their champion crowned even though Thesz was the better-known national star at the time. The promise was that Brown would hold the title for one year, and Thesz would get to win it and hold it for the next year. '

However, on November, 1, 1949, Brown was in a serious auto accident which for the most part ended his career (he did wrestle again but was never the same). So Thesz became champion, for a one-year contract. Every year at the NWA convention, they would have the key promoters vote on whether to renew the contract. Thesz was always renewed until he asked out in 1957 because he wanted out of the schedule, had problems with many of the promoters and felt he could have a better life touring internationally as International champion—since news traveled slow but because of all the years on top in the U.S., Thesz was regarded almost everywhere as the world champion. Plus, he could book his own dates.

The second was in 1965. Muchnick and McMahon got over the animosity of the Thesz-Rogers situation. Muchnick always believed that for the good of the sport, there should be one world champion, noting how the sport was ridiculed in the 40s for having so many champions. While Muchnick never fully achieved his goal, he was able to make deals with most major offices around the world to recognize Thesz. But it fell apart when Rogers was champion.

A Thesz vs. Sammartino title vs. title match was scheduled, and showing the power of Sammartino as a draw, it was the WWWF champion who was scheduled to go over, with the agreement that he would hold it for one year, and then drop it to Thesz. This never happened. Sammartino was presented with a touring schedule where he'd be working 30 days a month as champion to hit both the NWA and WWWF key cities. He outright refused, because at that point he would virtually never see his family.

Thesz refused as well, wanting a \$100,000 guarantee to do the job, which both Muchnick and McMahon believed was outrageous. Plus,

Thesz hated Mondt, and didn't like McMahon either, because during the period he was world champion, McMahon would never really promote him as champion. It was a double blame game, as Thesz was a strong draw as champion almost everywhere but the Northeast. Thesz blamed it on the promoters and what they promoted. They blamed Thesz's serious legitimate looking style of wrestling as not getting over in their part of the country. Part of the enticement to get Thesz back as a shooter to take the title any way necessary from Rogers in 1963 was it would be foiling McMahon and Mondt's attempt to steal the title, as the belief was they were going to book Rogers even less that year outside of their own territory and the Alliance was already crumbling by that point.

A funny part of that story is Rogers had put up \$25,000, a ton of money in those days, as the champion's bond to make sure that when the time came, he would drop the title. Muchnick came to Toronto with the \$25,000 and told Rogers that if he didn't lose to Thesz, they were giving the bond to charity, and told him he'd give the cash in good faith to McMahon and Mondt to hold until the end of the show. Rogers then told Muchnick not to do so, saying that he trusted Muchnick, who was his political adversary in this scenario, with his money, but not McMahon and Mondt, his allies. Now Thesz felt that after all that, they were giving them back the championship and he felt they would do the same thing, and never trusted after the year, he would be getting it back. He was probably smart to believe that.

Again, in looking at this, the key is, low numbers doesn't disqualify anyone from anything, because not every promotion was part of the NWA and some that were strong didn't book the champion. But this will possibly show some Hall of Fame candidates who have been overlooked, because if you have had a ton of title challenges over years-and-years, you are inherently one of the top guys in the business. In a sense I'm more interested in names that fall on the list over a long period of time, showing long-term stardom, than somebody who may have had a hot year or two, since generally speaking, that's what Hall of Fames are about. We'll study this more in the future post-1984. Even though some territories remained strong for one to three years after 1984, the business was completely different, as was the NWA title, which went from being a touring title to Ric Flair being part of the Jim Crockett national touring troupe, defending it mainly against the top babyfaces who worked at the time for Crockett as opposed to touring territories facing the top guys in every part of the world.

We'll start this look with the first year plus of the Thesz reign, starting with his being named champion at the Alliance meeting on November 27, 1949, through the end of his first full year at the end of 1950. That year, the clear-cut biggest contender was Wladek Kowalski, a few years before getting the Killer Kowalski nickname. He had 25 title shots based on records during that period. Others with the most shots were Enrique Torres (9), Rito Romero (7), Bronko Nagurski (6), Bill Longson (6), Rogers (6), Sonny Myers (4), Whipper Billy Watson (4) and Ruffy Silverstein (4).

1951: CHAMPION - Lou Thesz; Wladek Kowalski (12), Mighty Atlas aka Morris Shapiro (8), Ray Eckert (7), Enrique Torres (5), Buddy Rogers (4), Danny Savich (4), Emil Dusek (4); Mr. Moto, Yukon Eric, Duke Keomuka, Verne Gagne, Chest Bernard, Ray Gunkel and Bobby Managoff (3).

1952: CHAMPION - Lou Thesz; Mighty Atlas (10), Hans Schmidt (8), Bobby Managoff (7), Argentina Rocca (7), Verne Gagne (5), Ray Gunkel (5), Hombre Montana (4), Enrique Torres (4), Wladek Kowalski (4), Mr. Moto (4), Duke Keomuka (4), Ray Eckert (3), Bill Longson (3)

1953: CHAMPION - Lou Thesz; Ray Eckert (6), Killer Kowalski (5), Hans Schmidt (5), Verne Gagne (5), Gorgeous George (5), Argentina Rocca (4), Pat O'Connor (4), Ray Gunkel (4), Enrique Torres (4), Luther Lindsay (4), Mr. Moto (3), Ron Etchison (3), Hans Hermann (3), Bill Longson (3), Leo Nomellini (3), Sonny Myers (3), Juan Humberto (3), Bobby Managoff (3), Baron Leone (3), Duke Keomuka (3)

1954: CHAMPION - Lou Thesz; Ray Gunkel (8), Buddy Rogers (8), Bill Miller (7), Wilbur Snyder (7), Rito Romero (7), Johnny Valentine (6), Paul Baillargeon (5), Ronnie Etchison (4), Enrique Torres (4), Pat O'Connor (4), Lu Kim (3), Gorgeous George (3), Baron Leone (3), Mr. Moto (3), Luther Lindsay (3)

1955: CHAMPION - Lou Thesz; Pat O'Connor (7), Hans Schmidt (7), Wilbur Snyder (7), Don Leo Jonathan (6), Dick Hutton (6), Ray Gunkel (5), Ray Villmer (4), Buddy Rogers (4), George Gordienko (4), Johnny Valentine (4), Pepper Gomez (4), Lord James Blears (3), Yukon Eric (3), Argentina Rocca (3)

1956: Note that Whipper Billy Watson held the title from March 15 to November 9 when Lou Thesz asked for a vacation from the schedule; Thesz held it before and after that date: Hard Boiled Haggerty (10), Pat O'Connor (9), Pepper Gomez (8), Buddy Rogers (6), Hans Schmidt (6), Bobo Brazil (6), Lou Thesz (6), Mighty Ursus aka Jesse Ortega (6), Wilbur Snyder (4), Enrique Torres (3), Whipper Billy Watson (3), Gorgeous George (3), Luther Lindsay (3), Fritz Von Erich (3), Mr. Hito aka Kinji Shibuya (3)

1957: Lou Thesz held the title until June 14, 1957 when he lost to Edouard Carpentier. Based on a disputed finish, both Thesz and Carpentier held title recognition and defended the title until Carpentier's promoter, Eddie Quinn, quit the NWA and pulled Carpentier. A unification match was set for St. Louis that Carpentier would have won, as Thesz was leaving the NWA to tour overseas. Instead, the match didn't happen and Thesz lost the title to Dick Hutton on November 14, 1957: Don Leo Jonathan (7), Gene Kiniski (7), Whipper Billy Watson (5), Pepper Gomez (5), Sky Hi Lee (5), Ray Gunkel (4), Hard Boiled Haggerty (4), Lord James Blears (4), Edouard Carpentier (4), Lou Thesz (3), Roy Shire (3), Dory Funk Sr. (3)

1958: CHAMPION - Dick Hutton; Whipper Billy Watson (13), Lou Thesz (12), Gene Kiniski (6), Bill Longson (6), Buddy Rogers (5), Danny Plechas (4), Tarzan Zorro (4), Johnny Walker (3)

1959: Dick Hutton lost the title to Pat O'Connor on January 9 and O'Connor held it the remainder of the year; Lou Thesz (12), Dick Hutton (10), Pepper Gomez (9), Gene Kiniski (7), Tor Yamato (6), Don Leo Jonathan (4), Whipper Billy Watson (4), Joe Christie (4), Cowboy Bob Ellis (4), Mitsu Arakawa (3), Fritz Von Erich (3), Bill Longson (3), Danny Plechas (3), Luther Lindsay (3)

1960: CHAMPION - Pat O'Connor; Pepper Gomez (8), Gene Kiniski (8), Torbellino Blanco (8), Whipper Billy Watson (6), Shag Thomas (4), Don Leo Jonathan (4), Dick Hutton (4), Soldat Gorky (4), Dick the Bruiser (4), Bobby Managoff (4), Tiny Mills (4), Tony Borne (3), Cowboy Bob Ellis (3), The Sheik (3), Luther Lindsay (3), Bulldog Lee Henning (3), Yukon Eric (3), Jim Wright (3), Crusher Reggie Lisowski (3), Kinji Shibuya (3)

1961: CHAMPION - Pat O'Connor (until June 30), Buddy Rogers (until the end of the year): Johnny Valentine (11), Dory Dixon (7), Crusher Reggie Lisowski (7), Sweet Daddy Siki (6), Hans Schmidt (5), Pepper Gomez (5), Bruno Sammartino (4), Johnny Barend (4), Dory Funk Sr. (4), Ronnie Etchison (3), Karl Von Hess (3), Argentina Rocca (3)

1962: CHAMPION - Buddy Rogers; Johnny Valentine (13), Bruno Sammartino (12), Argentina Rocca (12), Bobo Brazil (12), Giant Baba (9), Edouard Carpentier (9), Sailor Art Thomas (8), Moose Cholak (5), Mark Lewin (5), Billy Darnell (4), John Paul Henning (4), Bulldog Brower (4), Dory Dixon (4), Cowboy Bob Ellis (3), Pampero Firpo (3), Killer Kowalski (3)

1963: CHAMPION - Buddy Rogers (until January 24), Lou Thesz (until the end of the year): Bill Miller (13), Dick the Bruiser (13), Danny Hodge (8), Cowboy Bill Watts (7), Sammy Steamboat (7), Rito Romero (5), Tarzan Tyler (5), Karl Gotch (4), Nick Kozak (4), Bobo Brazil (4), Mark Lewin (4), Professor Boris Malenko (4), Gene Kiniski (3), Killer

Kowalski (3), Ray Gunkel (3), Pat O'Connor (3), Hans Schmidt (3), Hiro Matsuda (3), Fritz Von Erich (3), Dan Miller (3)

1964: CHAMPION - Lou Thesz; Bob Orton Sr. (7), Karl Gotch (7), Sammy Steamboat (6), Johnny Valentine (4), Dick the Bruiser (4), Danny Hodge (4), Killer Karl Kox (4), Bulldog Brower (3), The Destroyer (3), John Smith (3), Johnny Weaver (3), Pat O'Connor (3), Don Leo Jonathan (3), Enrique Torres (3), Karl Von Stroheim (3)

1965: CHAMPION - Lou Thesz; Dick the Bruiser (12), Pat O'Connor (10), Cowboy Ron Reed aka Buddy Colt (6), Killer Karl Kox (5), George Scott (5), Danny Hodge (4), Don Curtis (4), Mike DiBiase (3), Bob Geigel (3), Johnny Weaver (3), Fred Blassie (3), Dan Miller (3), Sammy Steamboat (3), Abe Jacobs (3)

1966: CHAMPION - Lou Thesz (through January 7), Gene Kiniski (rest of the year); Lou Thesz (12), Fritz Von Erich (9), Dick the Bruiser (6), Eddie Graham (5), Don Curtis (4), John Tolos (4), Stan Stasiak (4), Bearcat Wright (4), Jose Lothario (4), Don Leo Jonathan (4), Missouri Mauler (3), Johnny Powers (3), Ernie Ladd (3), Buddy Fuller (3), Dory Funk Jr. (3), Edouard Carpentier (3)

1967: CHAMPION - Gene Kiniski; Lou Thesz (7), Don Leo Jonathan (6), Fritz Von Erich (6), Eddie Graham (5), Johnny Valentine (4), Pat O'Connor (3), John Tolos (3), Stan Stasiak (3), Dave Ruhl (3), Sailor Art Thomas (3)

1968: CHAMPION - Gene Kiniski; George Scott (7), Edouard Carpentier (5), Fritz Von Erich (5), Don Leo Jonathan (5), Lou Thesz (5), Abe Jacobs (4), John Tolos (4), Mr. Wrestling Tim Woods (3), Johnny Weaver (3), Dick the Bruiser (3), Ernie Ladd (3), Cowboy Bill Watts (3), Pat O'Connor (3), The Masked Professional Doug Gilbert (3), Bulldog Brower (3)

1969: CHAMPION - Gene Kiniski (through February 11), Dory Funk Jr. (rest of year); Johnny Valentine (5), Gene Kiniski (5), Hans Mortier (5), Dick Murdoch (5), Harley Race (4), Bulldog Lee Henning (4), Dale Lewis (4), Blackjack Lanza (4), Joe Scarpa aka Chief Jay Strongbow (4), Buddy Colt (3), Ronnie Etchison (3), Big Brutus aka Buggy McGraw (3), Lou Thesz (3), Rock Hunter (3), Super Inferno aka Tank Morgan (3)

1970: CHAMPION - Dory Funk Jr.; Jack Brisco (12), Gene Kiniski (6), Missouri Mauler (6), Thunderbolt Patterson (6), Pak Song (5), Johnny Walker (4), Nick Bockwinkel (4), Bob Orton Sr. (4), Danny Little Bear (4), Bull Ramos (4), Wahoo McDaniel (4), Bearcat Brown (3), Dale Lewis (3), Great Mephisto (3), Rip Hawk (3), Mongolian Stomper (3), Rufus Jones (3), Ernie Ladd (3), Pat O'Connor (3), Ricky Romero (3)

1971: CHAMPION - Dory Funk Jr.; Cyclone Negro (14), Jack Brisco (10), Johnny Weaver (6), Dick Murdoch (5), Rufus Jones (5), Harley Race (5), Clubfoot Inferno aka Great Mephisto (4), Johnny Valentine (3), Boris Malenko (3), Jerry Brisco (3), Danny Little Bear (3), Mongolian Stomper (3), Pak Song (3)

1972: CHAMPION - Dory Funk Jr.; Jack Brisco (17), Mr. Wrestling aka Tim Woods (9), Cyclone Negro (9), Fritz Von Erich (7), Johnny Weaver (6), Lord Al Hayes (5), Pak Song (5), Dick Murdoch (5), Paul Jones (5), Cowboy Bill Watts (4), Johnny Valentine (4), Rufus Jones (4), Mil Mascaras (4), Black Angus Campbell (4), Danny Hodge (3), Jerry Brisco (3), Dingo the Sundowner aka Les Roberts (3), Buddy Colt (3), Red Bastien (3)

1973: CHAMPION - Dory Funk Jr. (until May 24); Harley Race (May 24-July 20); Jack Brisco (rest of the year); Dory Funk Jr. (9), Johnny Valentine (7), Mark Lewin (6), Harley Race (6), Terry Funk (6), Mr. Wrestling aka Tim Woods (6), Johnny Weaver (6), Jack Brisco (4), Lou Thesz (4), Danny Little Bear (4), Jose Lothario (3), Big Bad John (3), Cyclone Negro (3), Gene Kiniski (3), Dick Murdoch (3), Thunderbolt Patterson (3), Rip Hawk (3), Mongolian Stomper aka Archie Gouldie (3), Omar Atlas (3), Buddy Colt (3), Abdullah the Butcher (3)

1974: CHAMPION - Jack Brisco (except one week in December held by Giant Baba); Dory Funk Jr. (20), Harley Race (14), Dusty Rhodes (12), Mr. Wrestling II aka Johnny Walker (8), Pak Song (8), Cowboy Bill Watts (8), Buddy Colt (8), Paul Jones (7), Tim Woods (6), Terry Funk (6), Dick Murdoch (5), Johnny Valentine (4), Jos LeDuc (4), Blackjack Mulligan (3), Super Destroyer aka Don Jardine (3)

1975: CHAMPION - Jack Brisco (until December 10); Terry Funk (rest of the year); Dory Funk Jr. (15), Bob Roop (13), Harley Race (9), Terry Funk (9), Wahoo McDaniel (8), Mongolian Stomper (7), Paul Jones (6), Rocky Johnson (5), Dick Murdoch (4), Mr. Wrestling aka Tim Woods (4), Abdullah the Butcher (4), Ron Fuller (4), Cyclone Negro (4), Jose Lothario (3), Curtis Laukea (3), Jerry Oates (3)

1976: CHAMPION - Terry Funk; Dusty Rhodes (27), Jack Brisco (11), Paul Jones (9), Mr. Wrestling II aka Johnny Walker (8), Thunderbolt Patterson (7), Jose Lothario (7), Super Destroyer aka Art Neilson (7), Harley Race (7), Mike George (6), Wahoo McDaniel (6), Billy Robinson (6), Pat O'Connor (5), Rocky Johnson (5), Gene Kiniski (5), Fritz Von Erich (4), Swede Hanson (4), Chavo Guerrero (4), Abdullah the Butcher (4), Mike Graham (3), Rufus Jones (3), Leo Burke (3), Tank Patton (3)

1977: CHAMPION - Terry Funk (until February 6); Harley Race (rest of the year); Wahoo McDaniel (8), Harley Race (6), Dusty Rhodes (6), Mr. Wrestling II (6), Ron Miller (5), Dory Funk Jr. (5), Terry Funk (5), Ken Patera (4), Ron Fuller (4), Rocky Johnson (4), Superstar Billy Graham (3), Bob Armstrong (3), Jerry Oates (3), Jimmy Snuka (3), Ricky Steamboat (3), Al Madril (3)

1978: CHAMPION - Harley Race; Dusty Rhodes (14), Jack Brisco (13), Wahoo McDaniel (10), Ricky Steamboat (8), Blackjack Mulligan (7), Dory Funk Jr. (5), Terry Funk (5), Jos LeDuc (5), Dick Murdoch (4), Thunderbolt Patterson (4), Bruiser Brody (4), Tony Atlas (4), Paul Jones (4), Rocky Johnson (3), Ron Miller (3), Leo Burke (3), Al Madril (3), Stan Hansen (3)

1979: CHAMPION - Harley Race (Dusty Rhodes and Giant Baba each had one week title reigns); Dusty Rhodes (12), Chief Peter Maivia (8), Bruiser Brody (7), Ricky Steamboat (7), Tommy Rich (7), The Assassin aka Jody Hamilton (6), Steve Keirn (6), Jimmy Garvin (5), Dick Murdoch (5), Andre the Giant (4), Ron Fuller (4), Harley Race (4), Bulldog Bob Brown (3), Mike Graham (3), Wahoo McDaniel (3), Ron Garvin (3), Tony Atlas (3), Dick the Bruiser (3), David Von Erich (3), Ric Flair (3), Kevin Von Erich (3)

1980: CHAMPION - Harley Race (Giant Baba had a one week reign); Dusty Rhodes (11), Tommy Rich (11), Ric Flair (8), Mr. Wrestling II (8), Dick Murdoch (7), Tony Atlas (5), Bulldog Bob Brown (5), Manny Fernandez (5), Andre the Giant (4), Mark Lewin (4), Mil Mascaras (4), Bruiser Brody (3), Barry Windham (3)

1981: CHAMPION - Harley Race (through June 21), Dusty Rhodes (through September 17), Ric Flair (rest of the year); Harley Race (18), Dory Funk Jr. (15), Tommy Rich (14), The Assassin aka Jody Hamilton (13), Mr. Wrestling II (12), Jack Brisco (10), Dusty Rhodes (10), Ric Flair (7), Ted DiBiase (6), Wahoo McDaniel (6), Charlie Cook (6), Barry Windham (6), Ole Anderson (6), Mike Graham (6), Ken Patera (4), Roddy Piper (4), Ivan Koloff (4), Masked Superstar aka Bill Eadie (4), Terry Funk (4), Carlos Colon (3), Iron Sheik (3)

1982: CHAMPION - Ric Flair; Butch Reed (23), Dusty Rhodes (22), Wahoo McDaniel (19), Harley Race (14), Jack Brisco (12), Tommy Rich (11), Dory Funk Jr. (10), Ricky Steamboat (9), Mike Graham (7), Paul Orndorff (7), Kerry Von Erich (6), Mr. Wrestling II (5), Paul Jones (5), Barry Windham (5), Ole Anderson (4), Sweet Brown Sugar aka Skip Young (4), Roddy Piper (4), Bad Leroy Brown (4), Brett Sawyer (4), John Studd (3), Bulldog Bob Brown (3), Invader #1 (3), Carlos Colon (3), Sgt. Slaughter (3), Rocky Johnson (3), Terry Gordy (3), Bob Armstrong (3), Ron Fuller (3), Jake Roberts (3), Buddy Rose (3), Jimmy Valiant (3)

1983: CHAMPION - Ric Flair (through June 10), Harley Race (though November 24), Ric Flair (rest of the year); Ric Flair (18), Barry Windham (11), Dusty Rhodes (8), Roddy Piper (8), Greg Valentine (8), Tony Atlas (8), Billy Jack Haynes (7), Harley Race (6), Bruiser Brody (6), Butch Reed (5), Kevin Von Erich (5), Mark Lewin (5), Ricky Steamboat (4), David Von Erich (4), Mike Rotundo (3), Tommy Rich (3), Kerry Von Erich (3), Jumbo Tsuruta (3), Pez Whatley (3)

A few things stand out right away. The first is the idea that it takes years to learn how to draw money in wrestling. If anything, judging by who was on top, the opposite was the case.

Wladek Kowalski, who based on all his shots in 1950 and 1951, was likely the best drawing opponent for Thesz, had just started his career. Top contenders like Ray Gunkel, Bill Miller and Wilbur Snyder were relative newcomers to the game when they had the hottest runs of their respective careers. While all three remained stars until the death, in the case of Gunkel, and retirement, in the case of Miller and Snyder, their hottest period on a national basis was when they were breaking in. They all had something unique. Kowalski was a 6-foot-7 bodybuilder, and people looking like him were a rarity in those pre-steroid days. Gunkel, Miller and Snyder were top-notch athletes coming out of college, and in the case of Snyder, the Canadian Football League. Pepper Gomez and Gene Kiniski were also headliners from the start, Gomez a somewhat well-known bodybuilder and Kiniski a football player/wrestler. Bruno Sammartino hit the list in his third full year in the business, and Bill Watts was a headliner and top title contender very early on. It also should be noted that the champions of that era were all great workers based on the standard of the times, and were counted on to carry green wrestlers, as opposed to the idea you had to be a great polished worker to be on top if you had an aura that could draw.

Most of the names would be familiar to most wrestling fans and not be a surprise. To me, the early 50s Mighty Atlas, Morris Shapiro, was a name rarely talked about. He was a bodybuilder who evidently drew well against Thesz. I was told that when the NWA first formed, they liked him as a contender because not only did the public buy him as a contender, but they were teaching the public a lesson that wrestlers beat the physically impressive muscle heads. It's the exact opposite message that Vince McMahon re-educated fans to in 1984. This is not to say one way is better than the other. With the advent of steroids, as well as more knowledge of how to eat for muscularity, the reality was guys could be a lot more physically impressive on a wrestlers' traveling schedule. And at the end of the day, whether it was Verne Gagne, Sam Muchnick or Vincent Kennedy McMahon, the idea was to headline with matches that draw money. If it was possible for someone to look like Hogan and get over like Hogan in 1951, I'm not saying he would be made world champion, but he'd be beating just about everyone, just as Sammartino did from the start of his career as he was just learning the game.

Rito Romero was a popular Texas babyface. During the pre-Von Erichs territorial days in Texas, the top babyface often was someone built to draw Hispanic fans, from Romero to Blackie Guzman to Pepper Gomez to Torbellino Blanco to Mil Mascaras and Jose Lothario.

One of the reasons I wanted to study this was to see if it would help or perhaps hinder borderline Hall of Famers, like Hans Schmidt and Snyder. I can't say the results surprised me. I already was aware of Schmidt being a top heel. Snyder was a major star in the 50s on a national basis, who ended up homesteading in Indiana, which was not an NWA territory. He and Bruiser eventually owned the office and kept themselves as the top two babyface stars. Snyder didn't travel much in the 60s and 70s, and Bruiser was always the top star with Snyder in the No. 2 spot.

Gomez looks very good here. The thing with Gomez is he's most known for his feud with Ray Stevens and his stardom in San Francisco. But like with Stevens, during that period the office was not an NWA member so he wasn't in the title picture. The level of star he was everywhere he went pre-San Francisco, most notably Texas, and his feud with Lou Thesz over the title when they did the gimmick that

Strangler Lewis had left Thesz to manage Gomez to the title was clearly one of the strongest programs of its era.

Sammartino's title challenges in 1961, and particularly 1962, would probably surprise people since he's so associated with the WWWF title. Another surprise would be Karl Gotch and Bob Orton Sr. as challengers when Thesz was champion in 1964, since Gotch is generally remembered as a great shooter who never was a top star as a pro, when, at least for a time, he was one of the biggest stars. Also notable is Danny Hodge, a junior heavyweight, being one of the top heavyweight contenders. While Rey Mysterio and Eddie Guerrero did that in modern WWF, ironically enough, Hodge was the only person holding the world junior heavyweight title who was also seen as someone who could win the heavyweight title. And if anything, Hodge's numbers were lower than they should have been because many promoters felt it wasn't a good idea to match Thesz vs. Hodge with the idea the titles should be kept apart.

An interesting note is as far back as 1958 was the name Johnny Walker, who was one of the most persistent challengers in history two decades later as Mr. Wrestling II, as well as a 1969 listing of a pre-Chief Jay Strongbow Joe Scarpa. Cyclone Negro's name hits the list big in 1971 and 1972, but there's a unique reason for that. Negro was the top heel and top rival of the Funk family, and when Dory Jr. was world champion, the Amarillo territory got more than their fair share of title matches, given the family owned the promotion.

The list also shows you the years of what I'd call super feuds for the title, Thesz vs. Kowalski in 1950 and 1951, Dory Jr. vs. Jack Brisco from 1970 to 1975, Terry Funk vs. Dusty Rhodes in 1976 and Ric Flair vs. Butch Reed, Wahoo McDaniel and Dusty Rhodes in 1982.

Reed is another interesting case, because I recall his program with Flair well. But I never thought he'd have in hindsight the kind of year he had when being the top babyface in Florida. Rhodes was out of the territory and Dory Jr. was booking, Dory Jr.'s philosophy from his father was very specific on booking and creating an ethnic star. If you make the ethnic star your top babyface, and he's got the charisma, you can create an ethnic hero. But just putting an ethnic guy on the show and keeping him strong isn't going to pay nearly the dividends. He went all the way with Reed (and with Skip Young as Sweet Brown Sugar, who was over like crazy at the time, and he never got over at one-fifth that level anywhere else), who had only been in the business three years at that point in time. Flair and Reed had tremendous matches and Reed had everything going for him, great athletic ability, agility, power, and he was impressive in the ring. I saw a match during spring break of 1982 in Miami Beach that was the best match live I had ever seen up to that point in time.

And Reed was a name player in the business for a number of years after, but was never as over as he was in Florida. He was a star in Mid South, but he suffered from the WWF Lex Luger syndrome, in the sense he was the star who followed JYD, the guy who popped the territory and the muscular African-American, even though Reed was 20 times the worker Dog was (but Dog was world's better as a promo and had a different level of charisma), too similar and it's just like The Rock & Roll Express didn't get over in Dallas or Memphis all that big, and The Fantastics didn't in Mid South, you are too similar following a super over act and it's a killer trying to get over to the level of actually drawing people.

Next is a chart of all the contenders during this period. Keep in mind this is only using the stats from above. Lots of these guys had title matches plenty of years where they weren't in the top echelon, but those aren't recorded here. But this is a list again to see if there over genuinely overlooked Hall of Fame talent. Keep in mind this list is skewed heavier to the more recent guys because the farther back in time you go, the more records of matches are lost forever. Also is a category of points, which is actually the most fair way of measuring things. People are ranked based on their rank for the year. That means if there's a year we don't have a ton of info on, the wrestler isn't penalized, it's ten for first for the year, nine for second, etc. The world champion for the year gets 20 points, and if it's split during the year, it's

correlated on a 1.67 points per month basis. If a top challenger leads the rest of the pack by 50% or more, they get five bonus points for the year.

| Wrestler | Yrs on List | Bouts | Points |
|--------------------|-------------|-------|--------|
| Ole Anderson | 2 | 10 | 4** |
| The Assassin | 2 | 20 | 12** |
| Mighty Atlas | 2 | 18 | 19 |
| Tony Atlas | 4 | 20 | 15 |
| Torbellino Blanco | 1 | 8 | 10 |
| Jack Brisco | 11 | 89 | 113* |
| Bobo Brazil | 3 | 22 | 19* |
| Bruiser Brody | 4 | 20 | 13* |
| Bulldog Brown | 2 | 11 | 5 |
| Dick the Bruiser | 7 | 45 | 44* |
| Abdullah Butcher | 2 | 10 | 2* |
| Edouard Carpentier | 4 | 21 | 20* |
| Buddy Colt | 5 | 23 | 17 |
| The Crusher | 2 | 10 | 9* |
| Don Curtis | 2 | 8 | 11 |
| Dory Dixon | 2 | 11 | 10 |
| Ray Eckert | 3 | 16 | 18 |
| Bob Ellis | 2 | 10 | 5*** |
| Ron Etchison | 4 | 13 | 7 |
| Ric Flair | 5 | 36 | 65* |
| Ron Fuller | 4 | 15 | 8 |
| Dory Funk Jr. | 12 | 82 | 139* |
| Terry Funk | 9 | 35 | 50* |
| Verne Gagne | 3 | 13 | 18* |
| Gorgeous George | 3 | 11 | 12* |
| Pepper Gomez | 6 | 39 | 44*** |
| Karl Gotch | 2 | 11 | 13* |
| Eddie Graham | 2 | 10 | 14* |
| Mike Graham | 4 | 19 | 6 |
| Ray Gunkel | 7 | 32 | 33 |
| HB Haggerty | 2 | 14 | 15 |
| Danny Hodge | 4 | 19 | 20* |
| Dick Hutton | 5 | 20 | 45 |
| Rocky Johnson | 4 | 20 | 6*** |
| Paul Jones | 5 | 36 | 23 |
| Rufus Jones | 3 | 15 | 8 |
| Don Leo Jonathan | 8 | 39 | 54* |
| Duke Keomuka | 3 | 10 | 7 |
| Gene Kiniski | 11 | 50 | 116* |
| Killer Kowalski | 5 | 52 | 43* |
| Killer Karl Kox | 2 | 9 | 14 |
| Ernie Ladd | 3 | 9 | 3* |
| Mark Lewin | 5 | 24 | 19*** |
| Luther Lindsay | 5 | 16 | 9 |
| Danny Little Bear | 3 | 11 | 10 |
| Bill Longson | 5 | 21 | 16* |
| Jose Lothario | 4 | 17 | 12*** |
| Bobby Managoff | 4 | 17 | 17 |
| Wahoo McDaniel | 8 | 64 | 42* |
| Bill Miller | 2 | 20 | 18* |
| Mr. Moto | 4 | 13 | 9 |
| Blackjack Mulligan | 2 | 10 | 6 |
| Dick Murdoch | 8 | 40 | 37** |

| | | | |
|-------------------|----|-----|-------|
| Cyclone Negro | 4 | 30 | 21 |
| Pat O'Connor | 12 | 54 | 98* |
| Bob Orton Sr. | 2 | 11 | 14 |
| Roddy Piper | 3 | 16 | 8* |
| T-Bolt Patterson | 4 | 20 | 17 |
| Harley Race | 14 | 93 | 173* |
| Dusty Rhodes | 10 | 112 | 89* |
| Butch Reed | 2 | 28 | 12 |
| Tommy Rich | 5 | 46 | 31 |
| Argentina Rocca | 5 | 29 | 23* |
| Buddy Rogers | 9 | 33 | 69* |
| Rito Romero | 3 | 19 | 21 |
| Bob Roop | 1 | 13 | 9 |
| Bruno Sammartino | 2 | 16 | 13* |
| Hans Schmidt | 6 | 34 | 41** |
| George Scott | 2 | 12 | 17 |
| Wilbur Snyder | 3 | 18 | 20** |
| Pak Song | 4 | 21 | 22 |
| Stan Stasiak | 2 | 7 | 11 |
| Ricky Steamboat | 5 | 31 | 18* |
| Sam Steamboat | 3 | 16 | 18 |
| Mongolian Stomper | 4 | 16 | 8 |
| Lou Thesz | 18 | 64* | 265* |
| Sailor Art Thomas | 2 | 11 | 10 |
| John Tolos | 3 | 11 | 16** |
| Enrique Torres | 7 | 32 | 32** |
| Johnny Valentine | 11 | 65 | 67* |
| Fritz Von Erich | 7 | 40 | 37* |
| Whipper Watson | 6 | 35 | 48* |
| Bill Watts | 4 | 22 | 18* |
| Johnny Weaver | 6 | 27 | 31 |
| Barry Windham | 4 | 25 | 13*** |
| Tim Woods | 5 | 28 | 24** |
| Mr. Wrestling II | 7 | 54 | 46** |

*Denotes Hall of Famer

**Denotes on this year's ballot

***Denotes formerly on the ballot, removed for lack of support

This chart isn't meant as any kind of be-all, like a Bill James study of the baseball Hall of Fame because wrestling has so many variables. The only reason I did this was both to look at who top contenders were in that period and to find out if there is an omission. On the list, everyone who scored more than 40 points is in the Hall of Fame except Pepper Gomez (one-and-done on the ballot), Hutton, Schmidt and Wrestling II. Schmidt and II have been on the ballot for years. Schmidt has been a contender, finishing 7th in last year's voting with 52%, and if anything, this strengthens his case although I wonder if it will matter. II has gotten votes, but last year only got 20%. Considering Gomez's career also includes his major stardom in San Francisco when it wasn't an NWA member, he may be that guy we were looking at as far as being overlooked. Hutton was not a successful draw as champion, but he was also a regular top contender before and after. If he was as lacking color and as bad a draw as his reputation, the reality is, promoters gave him the shots before and after. Certainly a lot had to do with his amateur background (one of the best college heavyweights of all-time, three-time NCAA champion with only one college loss in four years), during a period when legit backgrounds were favored by many promoters. Hutton and Gomez will be put back on the ballot and see if this makes any difference.

The 30s also brings some interesting debates. Gunkel, who was already set to debut on the ballot this year, is on, and these numbers don't take into account his long period as the top babyface in Georgia

when it had its own world title, nor that he was a successful promoter. On paper he is a strong overlooked candidate. Murdoch, who has incredible support among his peers but never gets the support of historians, has a stronger case, particularly when you factor in eight years as a top ten contender and that for the majority of his career, he worked around a Japan schedule that hurt his long-term territorial pushes. Tommy Rich was a big star and his numbers look good, but he flamed out early and I don't see him as a Hall of Fame guy at all. Enrique Torres is another interesting one, and again, his seven years as a top ten contender doesn't include his world title run in Los Angeles when the Olympic Auditorium was selling out constantly in the late 40s, or the fact he had a 20 year career where he was a main eventer from the day he started until the day he left. Torres is the prime example of a superstar who, for whatever reason, time forgot. Torres also got over as a main eventer in more territories than anyone not in the Hall of Fame with the possible exception of Schmidt. But he never worked New York and wasn't a legend in St. Louis or Japan, and those histories seem to age better.

Johnny Weaver is also an interesting case. He was the top babyface in the Carolinas from almost his arrival in the early 60s, until booker George Scott revitalized the territory and phased him to the middle. When champions like Thesz, Kiniski and Funk Jr., came to the area, Weaver was always positioned as their opponent and he was the guy who would come close but never quite get it. But I don't know that he's a Hall of Famer.

As far as others, Ole Anderson and The Assassin are on the ballot primarily as tag wrestlers so their not having top numbers here isn't surprising or particularly relevant. Paul Jones is a name never on the ballot, who was a major star in the 70s. Bill Miller is in, but these numbers were actually quite a bit lower than I'd have expected for him. But he spent much of his career working non-NWA territories and was one of the biggest drawing cards in wrestling in the late 50s and early 60s during years he's not on this list because of working places like Omaha, AWA and Indiana.

Thunderbolt Patterson is an interesting name on the list, although he's at a level that doesn't put you on the ballot just based on it, similar to Orton Sr. I can't see Rito Romero getting votes, as he was a Texas superstar for years after coming from Mexico where he was a top star, but never did anything anywhere else. George Scott is actually an interesting name, and the Scott Brothers were one of the best tag teams in history, but he's probably best known more as a booker.

Snyder was actually the guy I was most interested in, because personally I've been on the fence with him. Unfortunately, this added info just told me that it wasn't strong enough to push me over the fence., Ditto Mark Lewin, Tim Woods and John Tolos, who all had successful careers and are names I have considered for years, but never had the thing that made me think they were one of the ten strongest candidates on any year's ballot.

We had already added Spyros Arion, Batista (a very interesting candidate to say the least) and Gunkel to the ballot and based on this, I see putting Gomez back on and Hutton on. I'm also open to arguments on Lewin, Jones, Romero and Weaver from people who vote if they will vote for them, but with those names, it's probably better to wait until the 2012 ballot.

Another note when it comes to matches challenging for the NWA title, Dusty Rhodes looks to hold the record by leaps and bounds. His 112 recorded title challenges by the end of 1983 was first ahead of 93 for Harley Race and 89 for Jack Brisco. But keep in mind that Race left for WWF a few years later and Brisco left in 1984, while Rhodes was Flair's top contender and biggest drawing challenger for several more years, as he stayed on top through 1988 in the NWA, so if you figure historically, his final number would blow away everyone. Not having done the numbers, I would guess because the champion toured less and less, particularly by 1985, and was just a Crockett promotions champion, which meant a far fewer number of viable challengers with Rhodes being the biggest draw of all of them, Rhodes and Flair are very likely to, particularly circa 1986, have worked more with each

other than any championship program in NWA title history. Also due to the far fewer number of contenders and it being a one promotion champion, that if you figure the transition of the title to WCW (correct in the real world, but not technically correct), that Sting may end up near the top in title matches, plus he was a multi-time champion.

AUGUST 20, 2011

In the next part of our Hall of Fame series, when looking at the history of the NWA world heavyweight title, one of the things you can look at to determine who were considered the best performers had to do with doing 60 minute draws in championship matches.

Generally speaking, and there are exceptions to every rule, during most of the title run, going 60 minutes meant you were considered a pretty good wrestler as far as a worker goes, because if you weren't, going 60 minutes could be the kiss of death to a show. In addition, that also meant you were a top guy because until the title belt started getting prostituted in booking in the mid-70s when Jim Barnett took over booking the champion from Sam Muchnick, promoters were limited to how many 60 minute matches they could book the champion. But in addition, as time went on, particularly starting in the late 80s, these types of matches became rarer and rarer because the title meant less and attention spans were also less.

Before doing 60 minute draws, as best we can tell, the longest title matches of the NWA era (and in this case we are using the period from the first convention in 1948 until the title was dropped in 1991 and became the WCW title, after which 60 minute matches were almost never held. The AWA and WWWF title had occasional 60 minute matches, but we don't have as complete records and they were far more rare. It should also be noted that records are incomplete, and at best, these numbers are probably closer to 50 to 70 percent of what the real numbers would be. But here are the leading 60 minute men of that era.

Lou Thesz 215
 Harley Race 120
 Dory Funk Jr. 118
 Ric Flair 85
 Pat O'Connor 64
 Gene Kiniski 62
 Jack Brisco 56
 Whipper Billy Watson 36
 Terry Funk 31
 Buddy Rogers 31
 Dick Hutton 23
 Wilbur Snyder 15
 Ricky Steamboat 14
 Kerry Von Erich 14
 Don Leo Jonathan 14
 Enrique Torres 14
 Wahoo McDaniel 12
 Johnny Valentine 13
 Dusty Rhodes 11
 Johnny Weaver 11
 Orville Brown 11
 Verne Gagne 11
 Luther Lindsay 11
 Dory Funk Sr. 10
 Barry Windham 9
 Giant Baba 8
 Bruiser Brody 8
 Magnum T.A. 8
 Jumbo Tsuruta 8
 Ilio DiPaolo 8
 Pepper Gomez 8
 Argentina Rocca 8
 Bobby Managoff 8
 Rocky Johnson 7
 Fritz Von Erich 7

Billy Robinson 7
 Danny Hodge 7
 Dick Murdoch 6
 Mr. Wrestling II 6
 Ray Gunkel 6
 Dick the Bruiser 5
 Edouard Carpentier 5
 Lonnie Mayne 5
 Ron Miller 5
 Paul Jones 5
 Killer Kowalski 5

It's actually quite amazing since these numbers are not complete that it's likely Thesz had at least 300 world title matches that went more than an hour during his career. And that's just from 1949 on, since Thesz held versions of the world title actually dating back to 1937.

The people with the most draws in title matches not in the Hall of Fame are Dick Hutton, who looks like a strong candidate as the guy was a champion, but also a major contender for years before winning the title, Wilbur Snyder (always a leading contender), Kerry Von Erich (the thing that kills him is longevity, as he was absolutely having a Hall of Fame career through about 1985, but fizzled out from there), Enrique Torres (one of those guys who every single indication is that he was a top of the line guy, main eventer everywhere and top contender and what kills him is history forgot him), Johnny Weaver (a Carolinas star for a long time), Orville Brown (the original NWA champion) and Luther Lindsay (who has to be one of the most underrated wrestlers ever, as the guy had a great reputation as a genuine wrestler, clearly must have been able to draw because in those days putting an African-American on top was touchy because of the inherent racism in the public, let alone make him a top title contender), Barry Windham (similar to Von Erich), Magnum T.A. (An auto accident ended his career), Ilio DiPaolo (the Buffalo wrestling hero), Pepper Gomez (who is another person who when looking at these records come across as a far bigger star than he's remembered, because by the 70s, he was really long past his prime and that's where most people saw him, but from 1955-65 he was one of the biggest stars in the game).

The longest NWA title matches on record were 90minutes, and those with more than one 90 minute title match were Lou Thesz (9), Rito Romero (4), Pepper Gomez (4), Pat O'Connor (4), Whipper Billy Watson (2), Buddy Rogers (2), Jack Brisco (2) and Dory Funk Jr. (2).

JANUARY 16, 2012

It was 30 years ago this month that Sam Muchnick, the St. Louis promoter, held his final show. Muchnick was arguably the most powerful figure in pro wrestling during most of the period from about 1950 until 1975, as both the president of the National Wrestling Alliance for most of those years, as well as the booker of the world champion and the promoter for what, during a lot of that period, was when it comes to visibility and popularity within his market, among the best pro wrestling cities in the world.

Muchnick, who passed away on December 30, 1998, at the age of 92, is really the only promoter in modern history who truly left on his own terms and timetable while really at the peak of his success. There was a somewhat rough spell in the late 70s, when business was okay, but hardly through the roof. But in his last few years, things were as good as they had ever been, with stars like world champions Ric Flair and Harley Race, and a cast ranging of long-time legends who had been around and on top seemingly forever such as Dick the Bruiser, Pat O'Connor, Jack Brisco and Dory Funk Jr., newer stars in their prime like King Kong Brody (who didn't use the name Bruiser Brody in the city out of deference to Dick the Bruiser), Dick Murdoch, Rocky Johnson and Ken Patera, youth in the form of The Von Erich Brothers, David in particular being a huge drawing card, Ted DiBiase and Butch Reed, along with regular appearances from the biggest stars in the business at the time like WWF champion Bob Backlund, Andre the Giant and Dusty Rhodes.

It was a unique promotion. Sam Muchnick in many ways was similar, but in most ways was the opposite of Vince McMahon. Muchnick, while a successful promoter, never had the kind of financial clout McMahon had, and certainly had nowhere near his ambition. Muchnick had a life he enjoyed, and working as a wrestling promoter was a part of it, but hardly defined him. He was a major player in the city, supporting local causes, hanging around the race tracks, or the baseball and football games, living in a social circle with the area's sports leaders of the time, the owners and General Managers of the franchises and the cities most powerful media figures. For years, he actually shut down operations in the summer, not even taping television, and putting tapes from other NWA promotions in his time slot. This built for the opening of the new season in the fall, and exposed his fan base to new talent around the country that they could bring into the mix. The reason is that he didn't want to work that hard in the summer, and would rather attend baseball games. As the business changed, they ran more often in the summer, but it was always a slower schedule. Instead of promoting a circuit, like virtually every promoter, he ran one city, with live shows and television tapings every few weeks. He was proud that after a few rough years at the start, when he finally started rolling in the late 40s, even during periods of depression for the business and when he didn't have any television, he never had a money losing year, and rarely had money losing shows. Yet, he paid talent 32% of revenue, and he and Paul Boesch were known as the best payoff men in the business. Most promoters were paying 15-20%, and some of the smaller territories may have paid more on a percentage basis, but those cities weren't doing the grosses St. Louis was doing.

The two differed in the sense Muchnick wanted to make money, but he also wanted to be respected in town. Wrestling was a key part of the local sports community. His television show, "Wrestling at the Chase," during a boom period in the early 60s was held in the Khorrosan Room, an exquisite ballroom. The tapings drew a mostly adult audience, men in suits and ties, women in evening gowns, sitting at tables with fine dining. It was downright classy. In that environment, the characters who built the show, like Dick the Bruiser, Gene Kiniski, Fritz Von Erich, O'Connor, Rip Hawk and Cowboy Bob Ellis stood out even more.

As president of the NWA, he was conservative, very protective of the results of the world champion, who could do disputed finishes, but always had to win his feuds at the end. He was the referee in territorial border disputes. He tried to keep promoters from veering too far into illegal activities, often without success. There was frustration, at times in the early 60s, during a debacle when Buddy Rogers was world champion and he didn't have control of booking Rogers, who was working primarily for Vince McMahon Sr., and not going to a lot of the territories, a number of territories created their own world champions. There was a war of wills with Vince McMahon Sr., who Muchnick got along with socially, but he called back Lou Thesz, then 46, as a shooter, to get the belt back from Rogers. After a lot of manipulations and game playing, but against the wishes of McMahon, Thesz beat Rogers in Toronto to win the world title, leading to McMahon Sr. leaving the NWA, calling his new promotion the WWWF, and having Rogers as world champion until he dropped it to Bruno Sammartino.

But by the early 70s, the NWA was at its most powerful. Its champion was recognized by promoters all over the world. Promotions in Mexico, South America, Australia, Europe and Japan were part of the alliance. Even McMahon Sr. came back, and was no longer allowed to bill his WWWF champion as "world champion," as part of the deal. While Verne Gagne, who ran the AWA and was its champion, was not an NWA member, he still came to alliance meetings and was on friendly terms with the promotion. As much as could ever be possible, there was a cohesive nature to the business. All of this started to crumble in 1975, when a power play, based on promoters wanting to save on the 3% booking fee Muchnick would get from every show the champion appeared on (Jim Barnett agreed to book the champion and not take a fee), things happened at an NWA meeting that caused him to resign as champion. But he still was one of its most influential members until he got out of the business.

After the death of his wife, Helen, Muchnick, then 76, decided he would finish promoting with a show on January 1, 1982, at the Checkerdome.

The Muchnick retirement show was, many would say, the high point in the history of wrestling in the city's history. He was one of only two promoters, Paul Boesch in Houston being the other, where they drew a sellout crowd just based on the promoter doing his final show. Despite it being one of the biggest days of the year for football, many of the biggest names in the community, from politicians to media figures, were at the final show as well as the post-show party honoring Muchnick and January 1, 1982, was named Sam Muchnick Day by then St. Louis mayor Vincent Schoemehl.

St. Louis had a little more than one year as what many would say was the wrestling capital of North America, an era that ended really on February 11, 1983, when, in the aftermath of a Ric Flair vs. Bruiser Brody match, St. Louis Wrestling Club General Manager, Larry Matysik, Muchnick's protege, who doubled as the television announcer and was co-booker with Pat O'Connor, quit the company and, taking Brody with him, promoted on his own. His company was short-lived when he was negotiating for KPLR-TV, the station that aired "Wrestling at the Chase," the television show Muchnick started in 1959 and was a local institution, and found a surprising competitor for the slot, New York promoter Vincent K. McMahon, who was looking to expand his company nationally, and had already started promoting in California when the NWA offices run by Mike LeBell and Roy Shire had closed up.

The television station General Manager urged a compromise after agreeing that due to falling ratings and a poor television product, that they were going to cease their affiliation with the St. Louis Wrestling Club that Muchnick ran, effective at the end of 1983. He urged Matysik and McMahon to work together, and Matysik worked for McMahon as the local St. Louis promoter until the early 90s, by which point it was a completely different business and locally produced television was a thing of the past.

The St. Louis Wrestling Club business weakened greatly by late 1983. They had a hot period in 1985 when Ric Flair was drawing sellouts with Kerry Von Erich and Brody, but soon those ended up being the only matches that could draw, and after being done to death, they stopped drawing big crowds as well.

By early 1986, the St. Louis Wrestling Club was no more. The NWA brand continued but it was the regular NWA touring shows promoted by Jim Crockett and booked by Dusty Rhodes. Even though Ric Flair was actually the best drawing world champion the NWA ever had during his 1981 to 1983 run, the Crockett shows never drew all that well.

By this point, crowds for both the WWF and NWA shows were embarrassingly bad, as the city's fans grew up on a certain form of pro wrestling and weren't buying what either of the major companies was presenting. Muchnick always remained neutral, because he had friends on both sides. He would say he would never go against Matysik, but he also would not go against his former partners and his former company, which he sold his stock to the quartet of Harley Race, Bob Geigel, Pat O'Connor and Verne Gagne. When the St. Louis Wrestling Club folded, and Vince McMahon had a meeting with Matysik about what could be done in the city, Matysik suggested a one-night Sam Muchnick tournament and loading it up with wrestlers and doing it the old St. Louis style. The tournament, which came down to Harley Race pinning Ricky Steamboat, saw the Muchnick name draw a sellout, more than triple of what both major companies were doing at the time. In 1990, when Jim Herd, who was the director for Wrestling at the Chase and also friends with Muchnick, asked him to attend Starrcade in the city, and presented a Pat O'Connor Memorial tag team tournament, it drew the largest NWA crowd in the city since 1985. Muchnick made one last public appearance, on October 5, 1997, for the Badd Blood PPV run by WWF, which set a city record with 21,151 fans, a show promoted locally based on the fact that 92-year-old Muchnick and many of the world champions of the past, Jack Brisco, Dory Funk Jr., Terry Funk, Gene Kiniski, Lou Thesz and Harley Race would be there. That had its own political issues, as Jim Cornette scripted tributes to all of the men, but Kevin Dunn insisted they all be called "local stars" on the WWF broadcast, even though every one of

them were touring world champions and among the biggest stars in the history of the industry. It was the last time most of them saw Muchnick.

Muchnick was the promotional assistant to Tom Packs, the man who made St. Louis into a wrestling capital in the 1920s, including promoting the famous Joe Stecher vs. Strangler Lewis match in 1928 that was the meeting of the two biggest stars of the era who had worked as world champions for rival promoters and that at the time, everyone in the business thought was going to be the ultimate shooting match for the title (it was worked match that everyone agreed upon ahead of time that Lewis would win). After a falling out over money, when Muchnick worked his ass off promoting a major boxing title fight for Packs and only got a \$200 bonus when the fight did huge business, and finding out that Packs' partners thought he should be cut in for more and it was Packs who made the call not to do so, Muchnick quit. He began promoting in opposition to Packs briefly in 1942, but was not successful and the promotion closed when Muchnick served in World War II. He reopened after the war in 1945, at a time Packs was doing huge business with Wild Bill Longson, one of the greatest drawing heels of all-time and generally considered the biggest drawing card in the history of the city, as his headliner. Muchnick took the tact of trying to compete using mostly shooters, from the almost completely blind 54-year-old Strangler Lewis, former champion Ray Steele (who once represented pro wrestling in a boxer vs. wrestler match in St. Louis, winning in about 30 seconds) to Olympians Ed Virag and Roy Dunn, NCAA champion Cliff Gustafson (the first great University of Minnesota heavyweight to be a pro wrestling star), football legend Bronko Nagurski and Lee Wyckoff. He slowly built his crowds from 3,700 to more than 6,000 on good nights, but that paled in comparison to Packs' crowd with Longson and the pre-Nature Boy Buddy Rogers (it should be noted that Longson vs. Rogers drawing 17,621 fans in 1946 shows the myth that Rogers was a copy of Gorgeous George, or that George was the first bleached blond star with robes, since George didn't even become that a big star until television in 1947 (although he used the name and was actually a regular headliner for Muchnick in 1946 and 1947 doing in the range of 3,000 to over 6,000 fans. But Rogers, who took the Nature Boy name later after a 1947 song by Nat King Cole, was a bigger draw and a superstar first.

Muchnick began faltering in 1946 as Packs was hot with his big three of Longson, Rogers and Lou Thesz. The turning point came in 1948, when Muchnick was one of the founders of the new version of the National Wrestling Alliance (the name had been used in Kansas dating back to 1940 but the national organization was formed in 1948), an alliance of various promoters, some powerful, and some not, with the goal of creating one world champion. The media at the time always made fun of pro wrestling's plethora of world champions. But it was really about talent sharing, and Muchnick maneuvered well. Al Haft, one of the era's most powerful promoters out of Columbus, OH, who booked Rogers, was convinced to join the alliance. With Muchnick as the St. Louis rep, this meant Rogers switched sides. Rogers was such a big star at the time that he was the key to almost instantly turning around of Muchnick's business. Both sides were doing well, but Packs had outside business debts and sold his company to a consortium headed by Thesz. After a some battling, Thesz and Muchnick, who had been friends since the 30s when Muchnick would go on the road with Thesz as world champion and the two would play handball together in local gyms on the road. His job was to make sure Packs (who booked the title) got the right percentage of the gate, and sometimes worked as the referee for the title match, agreed to pool resources. It was presented to the public as if there were two competing companies, one publicly headed by Martin Thesz (the public face since it would look bad if Lou Thesz was the owner and world champion) and the other headed by Muchnick, but in reality they were co-owners of both companies, with Muchnick owning 51%. It wasn't a worked promotional war and the promotions used much of the same talent. Eventually they gave up the idea of presenting it as two different promotions to the public.

Historian Scott Teal in a bio on Muchnick said, "One could safely say that Sam Muchnick made more of a positive impact on professional wrestling than anyone, promoter or wrestler." I don't know if I would go that far, but he was probably the single most influential person in the industry for 25 years. The period had its ups and downs, largely based

on the changing technology of television, both being victimized by early overexposure, learning how to make television work, and a rebirth with the growth of UHF television stations on a regional basis. This is not to say Muchnick was not part of dirty backroom dealings. But publicly, he always kept his reputation clean in the community. He and Thesz battled often, usually about Thesz being booked on small shows, flying coach as world champion, or being booked on shows with gimmick matches and the arduous schedule. He and the alliance were late in working with Japan and Australia when they became wrestling hotbeds, not thinking past the U.S. and Canada. Most of the promoters only cared about their own business and had no worldwide view of the game. Muchnick had a North American view, which was more than most. In the early 60s, there was a movement to rotate the presidency of the NWA to get different minds in charge, and that nearly killed the organization, particularly when Rogers, then booked by Vincent James McMahon, became world champion. Muchnick's ability to outfox McMahon and get Rogers to lose to Thesz put him back in power as the head of the NWA in 1963, a position he maintained for the next dozen years.

Muchnick always presented African-American wrestlers with a different mindset. In a racially diverse city, it wasn't until the mid-60s when African Americans ever main evented. Some questioned that when Ernie Ladd became a big star at that time, that he wasn't given world title matches that others who were over as much would have gotten. On the flip side, Muchnick protected the African-Americans that he didn't give the main event opportunities, with a mentality of only having them lose when necessary. No African-American wrestlers were ever considered for the NWA title during the Muchnick era, although the flip side of the argument is that one couldn't name one who on paper would have been a better choice during the time than the people who dominated the belt. Bobo Brazil was a good attraction and a superstar, but really not the level of worker they wanted the champion to be. Bearcat Wright was a great draw when given the ball. But he developed a reputation in the business that severely damaged his career. Wright was made world champion in Los Angeles, the first African-American to hold what was at the time one of the major world championships. But Wright refused to drop the title to Edouard Carpentier, and later shot and refused to drop the title to Fred Blassie. Wright then left town with the belt when he found out Gene LeBell was going to be his opponent in a title match and he was coming for real. So Wright as champion was someone they wouldn't even consider. Others just weren't the level of stars.

Matysik, whose next book will no doubt be controversial, out this coming summer, "The Definitive Shoot: The 50 Greatest Pro Wrestlers of All-Time," wrote about that final event.

Even the newest pro wrestling fans have probably heard Don McLean's classic song American Pie. How many have sung along when McLean voiced the lyrics about, "A long, long time ago . . . that music used to make me smile." And particularly to the point, "Something touched me deep inside, the day the music died."

Well, McLean could also have penned lyrics that clicked for many fans and even participants about a part of pro wrestling that was special and actually died when Sam Muchnick in St. Louis presented his retirement card 30 years ago, on January 1, 1982. Thirty years ago! In retrospect, with many a bump and swerve in between, that was the day a certain part of pro wrestling died in some vital portion.

Truthfully, the fact that the program drew a record sellout crowd of 19,819 to what was known then as The Checkerdome is inconsequential. Actually, the lineup itself matters little, though it had many major names of the period. This baby was going clean even if ring announcer Mickey Garagiola met Larry Matysik in the main event, because it was Sam's farewell to wrestling and St. Louis. More notably, what passed away was the demonstration and proof that this bizarre business of pro wrestling could aspire to and achieve a higher stature than most mainstream media and the general public would admit.

Granted, St. Louis was the odd duck even in the so-called territory era. Muchnick was the promoter of a stand-alone town that cherry-picked

the best names from various areas and featured them in St. Louis. Minority partners in Muchnick's St. Louis Wrestling Club often provided St. Louis the boys to fill out first-class shows with strong undercards. Additionally, Muchnick had come out on top of a bruising promotional war with longtime promoter Tom Packs in St. Louis in the late 40s and that created a strong persona not to mess with.

Yes, he did concentrate on his role as chief power and usually president of the National Wrestling Alliance (elected president every year from 1950 to 1960, and again from 1963 to 1975), which helped keep a rowdy bunch of independent small businesses (the territories) in some sort of order. Sam had connections in both the media and political realms that made him the quiet ruler of the mat world. In the end, usually, Sam got what he wanted.

Indeed, I did work for him from my high school days in the mid-60s as a "go-fer" to finally becoming the commentator for "Wrestling at the Chase," handling all the marketing, running the office, and eventually being involved in the booking. I learned the business from Sam, and those who populated the St. Louis scene. But I'm not a so-called "mark" for Sam.

He had his flaws, played politics and manipulated within the business, looked out for his own town, protected his personal reputation, and built a power-base by making pro wrestling more than it had ever been anywhere else. In other words, Sam Muchnick was a hell of a businessman who fully understood what made his field and his town tick in his day and time.

Sort of like Vincent K. McMahon right after him . . . but without the flash. The business changed, as it was going to, whether Muchnick retired or not. And it may be changing again today, as Vince hits his mid-60s. This is the natural progression of the world. And I do give Vince his due as the greatest pro wrestling promoter of all time. But Muchnick was the guy in his time.

At any rate, because of the way the St. Louis promotion educated its audience and booked its performers, the town had a special niche. In some ways, it is forgotten now because it was only one town and not a territory, so fewer folks are around to remember the good times or sing the praises of the television and house shows.

But ask Dory and Terry Funk, ask Harley Race, ask Ted DiBiase, ask Jerry Brisco, ask even a Bob Costas from the media side . . . ask any of those who understood that what happened in St. Louis had great depth; the business itself along with its performers had a respect from the general public and media unmatched anywhere else thanks to how Sam ran the show from top to bottom, in every detail . . . do not insult the intelligence of your loyal audience or the general public . . . never false book nor lie to either . . . keep control of the carnival and violent sides so that less can mean more when a hot angle is shot . . . demand a strong, competitive style . . . be open to new aspects of television and marketing . . . protect the championship as the Holy Grail so that it alone means something . . . build rivalries between true stars so that what happens matters . . . educate, educate, educate in a friendly, colorful, relaxed manner . . . pay your bills and be a professional in all circumstances representing a business that some want to scorn . . . This list can go on and on with simple but effective tools.

By New Year's Day 1982, Muchnick had been phasing out somewhat locally and definitely within the NWA, which had become a shaky and crumbling structure. Yet in the town, pro wrestling was unique and consistently, incredibly successful.

When I asked a couple of local personalities to perhaps make an appearance at the card to congratulate Sam, my phone went nuts.

"I want to be there too!" was the constant refrain. Before long, a cast of characters (from major sports, the media including newspapers to

television to radio, and from the police, the mayor and the governor's offices) was assembled to honor Sam's farewell.

And that was just the public side. The private party afterwards showed even more of society as the wrestlers from the card mixed with the most famous and powerful people both locally and, in some cases, nationally. They wanted to be there. Nobody had to be paid.

From my perspective — from a promotion perspective — it was the most satisfying and successful effort ever. I've written before how, as my wife and I gave them a ride back to the Chase Hotel late that night, Gene Kiniski and Verne Gagne sang to us, "There's no business, like show business."

It was the greatest night ever. And it was the saddest night ever. For pro wrestling was entering a different phase, a period of upheaval and change. This side was dying. Not right, not wrong, not better, not worse. Just different.

Isn't it sad that nobody has yet figured out how to take the best of what St. Louis offered and put it with the best of what WWE offers? Somewhere in there is a potential bombshell, not that WWE needs it. Yet.

So forgive me if I put a little twist on it when I hear Don McLean sing about, "the day the music died." I was there for the day pro wrestling died, here, just a little bit — thirty years ago.

SAM MUCHNICK'S FINAL SHOW

JANUARY 1, 1982 - ST. LOUIS CHECKERDOME

ATTENDANCE: 19,819 - CITY ALL TIME RECORD FOR
ATTENDANCE AND FOR LIVE GATE

1. Bulldog Bob Brown DCOR Jerry Brown
2. Wendi Richter & Joyce Grable won 2/3 falls from Sandy Partlow & Early Dawn
3. Pat O'Connor (in what was billed as his retirement match) b Bob Sweetan
4. Crusher Blackwell won handicap match over Butch Reed & Ox Baker, pinning Baker
5. Dewey Robertson b Von Raschke (Jim Raschke in St. Louis was billed as Von Raschke, and not Baron Von Raschke, because Muchnick would say, "Is he really a Baron?")
6. David Von Erich & Rufus R. Jones DDQ Harley Race & Greg Valentine
7. Dick the Bruiser (the city's most popular wrestler of the past two decades) b Ken Patera to win the Missouri State title for a third and final time)
8. Ric Flair won 2/3 falls over Dusty Rhodes to retain the NWA world heavyweight title with Gene Kiniski as referee

NOVEMBER 10, 2014

Bob Geigel, one of the last two survivors of the late 1940s era of amateur wrestling tough guys that became big names in pro wrestling, and who was best known later as the NWA President, passed away on 10/30.

Geigel was 90. He had suffered a broken hip several months ago. He was living in a nursing home and his death was reported as due to complications from Alzheimer's Disease. He and wife Vera had been married for 67 years at the time of his passing.

"That's pretty much the end of that era," said Terry Funk, who was in grade school when Geigel first came to Amarillo in 1952 to both wrestle and work at Cal Farley's ranch for troubled boys. "That was the era of what would be the MMA guys in wrestling. You had all of those guys coming out of school that were very tough guys, Geigel, (Verne) Gagne, (Ray) Gunkel, (Dick) Hutton, (Tony) Morelli (the master of the double wristlock, who could get it legitimately from all angles, long before anyone called the move a Kimura), (Ruffy) Silverstein, (Lou) Thesz, (Pat) O'Connor, guys like that, Ricki Starr, Mike DiBiase, all the guys, really, really tough guys. They loved the business. He was the last one to go from that era."

Technically, that's incorrect, as Verne Gagne is still alive, although has been suffering for years from extreme dementia. Geigel, Gagne and Maurice Vachon, who passed away in November, were the final names from that group still alive in recent years.

Geigel broke into pro wrestling in early 1950, shortly after graduating the University of Iowa, where he played football and wrestled, including placing third in the 1948 NCAA tournament at 191 pounds.

He was a powerful son of a farmer, with great grip strength. Born October 1, 1924, in Algona, IA, he was playing football in high school when the wrestling coach wanted him to try out.

"My father said I had to unload corn on Friday nights," Geigel said in an interview with Slam! Wrestling years ago. Then one night, the coach and his wife came to my house to eat supper with us. The coach talked to my dad, and my dad said it's hard to let me go at that time in the fall because we were unloading corn every night. The coach said, 'I can get him out by 6:30,' and my dad agreed."

Geigel placed second in the state of Iowa in wrestling in his senior year of high school in 1942, and then served in the U.S. Navy for four years, stationed in the Pacific. After the war, he went to Iowa and played football for four years and wrestled for three years, and made it to the NCAA tournament all three seasons.

His biggest rival in amateur wrestling was Gagne, who always beat him when it counted. In 1947, when both wrestled at heavyweight, Gagne beat Geigel 6-1 in the second round of the NCAA tournament, which saw future pro wrestlers take the first three placings in that division with Hutton, Gunkel and Gagne. In 1948, dropping to 191, because he felt he'd have a better shot at the Olympics in the lighter weight class, he lost to eventual champion Gagne in the finals of the Big-10 tournament. At the NCAA's he was pinned by Gagne in 2:30, but came back to place third. In 1949, back at heavyweight, he beat future pro wrestler Don Arnold of San Diego State in his first match, but once again lost to eventual-champion Gagne in his second bout in the tournament, 5-1, and didn't place.

He met his wife in college, and they were married in 1947.

After college, he had an offer to play pro football, but met pro wrestler Alphonse "Babe" Bisignano, who talked him into pro wrestling instead.

"Bisignano and I were talking one afternoon and he asked me what I was going to do after college," Geigel said. "I said, 'I might have a tryout with the Chicago Cardinals (now Arizona Cardinals).' He said,

"You're not going to make a lot of money and you will probably get hurt, so why don't you let me help you get into pro wrestling."

So after he got his degree, he started in Florida in 1950. He went everywhere learning the trade. In his first nine months in the business, he worked matches in Florida, the Carolinas, Chicago for Fred Kohler (the leading promoter of the time), Omaha, the Central States, Minnesota and St. Louis.

He claimed that he had the first match of Ray Stevens, when Stevens was 16-years-old, in 1952 in Columbus, OH. He remarked decades later that Stevens, one of the biggest stars of the 60s and 70s, was almost a finished performer when he started.

He came to Amarillo in 1952. Dory Funk Sr. was, at the time, the superintendent of the Cal Farley Boys Ranch for troubled kids. Geigel was hired at the ranch, with the idea he'd also wrestle part-time at night on shows within driving distance. Funk found the job rewarding, but it didn't pay much, and also got out because his wife got an ulcer. Funk went back to pro wrestling full-time and turned the ranch over to Geigel, who took over as superintendent for about a year-and-a-half.

It was in West Texas where Geigel became a star, in an area where the fans liked the tough guys. Geigel, balding with a hairy upper body, really didn't have the look or the charisma to be a major market headliner. He wasn't huge, starting out as a junior heavyweight and being about 5-foot-10 and wrestling most of his career at about 230 pounds. But he was muscular based on his era when he was young, not in a standout way like a weightlifter, but like a wrestler with powerful legs. The cowboys in the audience in those days had an eye for who they believed were rugged guys, and he was a major star for years in that part of the country, and remembered whenever he'd come back down. It was during that run that he picked up the nickname that followed him for the next two decades, "Texas" Bob Geigel.

"I very much remember him as a kid," said Terry Funk. "We had a total gym in our garage and the guys would go out there and the ones who could shoot would shoot. They traded that knowledge with each other. It was bunch of wonderful guys and they learned a bunch of wonderful stuff. It was very much a closed situation. They'd go there, and it was never spoken about afterwards. They were the tough guys. They knew it."

The mentality was more like an MMA gym, because Funk remembered that what happened in the gym, stayed in the gym.

Dory Funk Jr., who was a few years older, remembered being in the gym watching his father, Geigel and Gagne go back-and-forth on the mat.

While he continued to travel for years, it was really in West Texas and the Central States where he was best known.

He always wrestled as Bob Geigel, or Texas Bob Geigel, except for a 1955 run in Texas where he went under a mask as The A-Bomber. Eventually he was unmasked in a May 16, 1955 match in Fort Worth against Leo Nomellini.

He first bought into the Heart of America Sports Attractions office in 1958, paying \$3,300 to promoter George Sampson. By 1963, it was really he and Pat O'Connor that were running things. Geigel was the promoter and O'Connor was the booker. Gust Karras, who publicly was known as the promoter since Geigel and O'Connor were main event wrestlers during the 60s and it was figured fans would ask questions if it came out they also were the owners.

Karras also sold most of his stock in the St. Louis office to Geigel in 1969 (the stock Karras retained in St. Louis was sold by his widow to Harley Race after his death in 1976). In the Central States, Karras remained the front man until his death at the age of 73. At that point,

Geigel, in his early 50s, slowed down as a wrestler, although he did still get into the ring from time-to-time, with his last match in 1980, and was publicly acknowledged as the promoter.

"On a personal level, I liked Bob Geigel," said Larry Matysik. "He was a character. He could be funny. He was the stereotypical old-school wrestling guy. He was a tough guy. But he was from a different part of wrestling with a different philosophy than I had been brought up in."

"Sam (Muchnick) liked him, but he also recognized the faults. The main reason he was invited in (to own part of the promotion) was geography. They (the Kansas City office) gave us enough talent to fill the preliminary matches and slots on the TV shows."

Still, Matysik said, and others echoed that Geigel really didn't seem to understand the difference between good talent and big money drawing talent.

Jack Brisco used to tell the story about when he and Dory Funk Jr. were at the peak of their program in 1972 with their match that sold out the Bayfront Center in St. Petersburg and was perhaps the classic match of that style in that era. Earlier in the night, Jack, Eddie Graham and Geigel, who had flown in to see the show, which was a major event at the time. They were talking and Geigel saw the packed house, and said, "I don't understand why we can't draw like this." Graham shot back, "Because you're a stupid son of a bitch," and Geigel just laughed and smiled.

But he was good with saving money. Geigel worked most of his career in smaller territories where he could make a living, but nobody was going to get rich. But he said that when he first got started, he became friends with a stock broker in Kansas City, who talked him into buying some stock.

"I did that every week," Geigel told Matysik years ago. "Some weeks I may have only had enough money to buy two or three shares of stock, and I went in and people were laughing. Some weeks I'd buy 20 shares. But I did it every week."

Geigel also purchased a farm in Texas, not far from Dory Funk Sr.'s Flying Mare Ranch in Umbarger, which he sold some 50 years later in 2006. He also loved going on hunting trips with his fellow wrestlers.

The Central States promotion was hardly a hotbed, usually drawing a few hundred fans per night. Still, Geigel would always push Muchnick to use his guys in main event roles, and sometimes Muchnick would do so, since he was a partner. But the results were usually not good because it was the difference between talent that could work well enough to put on a match and talent who could get people to buy tickets to a show at a major arena. Muchnick would sometimes get frustrated that they would be partners in St. Louis, and make good money from it, but seemingly learn nothing from it.

He'd note that Kansas City had a 10,000 seat building, and they could bring in the top names like St. Louis, perhaps work a Friday/Saturday combo to save on transportation costs every second or third week. But instead, they were happy running every Thursday night at Memorial Hall before 800 fans. Muchnick was very conservative when it came to his angles and what he would allow. After he retired, Matysik remembered Race saying to him, "Now we can open things up like Kansas City," and Matysik thought that's exactly what isn't going to work, and questioned why, given how much more successful one city was then the other, and they all knew it, that they would emulate what they did in the weaker market.

Geigel was elected President of the National Wrestling Alliance from 1978 and 1980, and again from 1982 to 1985, and 1986 to 1987. It was more a figurehead role since the NWA power was in the Southeast, with Eddie Graham, Jim Crockett Jr., and Jim Barnett. When Muchnick was NWA President, while he was called to mediate in various disputes, his main job was booking the world champion.

Muchnick quit as President in 1975. There was pressure at the time to get him out. Other promoters felt Muchnick was too strict on finishes he'd allow the champion to do. Plus, Muchnick pushed for the champion, and he as the booker of the champion, to get their proper percentage, even though most promoters still cheated on that. Barnett booked the world champion from 1975 to 1982, but was far more hands off on how promoters used the champion. But because Barnett was gay, he was not ever considered to be NWA president, and instead given the title of Secretary Treasurer

Still, Geigel was a power broker, as shown by his top star, Race, having a long run as world champion. Race's first title win was more as a potential shooter with his reputation as a tough guy. Dory Funk Jr. was champion, and was supposed to drop the title in 1973 to Jack Brisco in Houston. Days before the match, the Funk family sent word to Muchnick that Dory Jr. had suffered a separated shoulder and totaled a truck in an accident on the Funk Family ranch. The timing made everyone skeptical, even though the Funks sent in complete medical reports. To this day among older people in the industry that were around, it's a much debated point on whether or not that was legitimate, although the Funks have always insisted the injury and accident were real.

The decision was made that as soon as Funk Jr. recovered, he'd drop the title in Kansas City to Race. Race was considered just about the toughest street fighter of that era. But the match being in Kansas City had its political reasons, since Geigel was close friends with The Funks, it was Race's home at the time, and Geigel was also a partner in St. Louis. Race, after two months, dropped the title to Brisco. In 1977, Geigel was behind the push for Race to get his long run as champion. However, Race, who lost by one vote in 1975 to Terry Funk to get the title from Brisco, at that point by most accounts would have gotten the title even if Geigel hadn't done all the legwork for him.

While most of the big names worked Kansas City at one point or another, it was not a good paying territory unless you were on top, and the roster was filled with guys starting out or at the end of their careers. Kansas City was the first territory Jesse Ventura worked after being trained by Eddie Sharkey, an old friend of Geigel's from Minnesota who Geigel first trained, and also the first territory Roddy Piper worked. Geigel also helped train Ox Baker, Dick Murdoch, and West Texas star Ricky Romero.

The Central States were almost a stereotypical small-town promotion, with long drives to weekly shows in places like Kansas City, St. Joseph, Wichita, Salina, Topeka, Des Moines and Waterloo, IA. Geigel worked as one of the top stars for nearly two decades. He had a long run as a heel. Eventually he became a babyface later in his career after breaking up with tag team partner Bulldog Bob Brown.

During the 60s, the territory was built around Sonny Myers, the veteran from St. Joseph, MO. Myers had been a big star in the 50s off Fred Kohler's national TV, and Jody Hamilton called Myers the best babyface worker he ever saw. Geigel was his frequent rival, and they also headlined with Archie "The Stomper" Gouldie from Canada, O'Connor, Enrique Torres and the "Old Pro from St. Joe," Ronnie Etichison. Geigel was in his late 30s and well into his 40s during his best remembered period in the Central States as one of the top stars, and came across with the vibe as the tough older man.

By the late 60s, Race, who would go on to be the area's all-time biggest star emerged, first as Mad Dog Race and then Handsome Harley Race, along with veterans like Nature Boy Roger Kirby, Rufus R. Jones and Brown. Dick Murdoch & Dusty Rhodes teamed up early in their careers there as The Texas Outlaws, and Ed Wiskoski (Col. DeBeers) also got his start as a football player turned wrestler.

Geigel also owned a bar called "The Tender Trap," where the wrestlers and fans would hang out after the matches in Kansas City.

Geigel as majority owner of his territory, and part owner in St. Louis, which was the flagship city of the NWA, was happy to take the NWA

President position. It required occasionally cutting videos and making rulings on disputed title matches. The feeling was that Geigel delivered an authoritative direct interview. He came across, as J.J. Dillon would describe him, as "A man's man."

Since a lot of the promoters were doing controversial finishes in world title matches, the need was for the local face to get screwed, but in a logical way. Geigel enforced the rules when he sent in the videos, but in no way in that era would the role of NWA President be an overt heel. But sometimes his rulings weren't going to be popular, because they usually allowed the heel champion to escape via legitimate but unpopular technicality against the local hero.

After Muchnick left the position, Fritz Von Erich was named NWA President, and since that was a gimmick name, they also made sure to call him Jack Adkisson. But his sons were about to start wrestling. With his sons to be challenging for the world title and be screwed by technicalities all the time made it impossible for Fritz to be NWA President. Eddie Graham held the position, but he also didn't want to be the bad guy, as he was the public face of his promotion, in rulings against the local hero in his own territory. Crockett Jr. was NWA President in 1981 and 1982, and again in 1985-86 and after 1987. But by that period, the NWA was falling apart.

One thing that drove Muchnick crazy, was Geigel's penchant for coming to the St. Louis office in cut off blue jeans and flip flops. He'd come either to the office at the Warwick Hotel, or even worse, the TV at the Chase Hotel, the ritziest hotel in the city, which still exists today. Muchnick was constantly afraid that a major civic leader, a major person in the media such as a newspaper reporter or television station executive would see the "President of the NWA" walking around in jeans and flip flops.

"He wouldn't tell Bob, but he'd say, 'Can you imagine the President of the NWA walking around and he could be seen like that by the sports editor of the Globe-Democrat or Ted Kopplar (the president of KPLR-TV, which aired Wrestling at the Chase),' Sam would go nuts. But that's how Bob was raised in wrestling. He was from the small town world. It was a different world than Eddie Graham, Vince Sr. and Frank Tunney."

I can recall going to a show in Kansas City in 1989, after the territory was shut down, and Geigel was promoting a single show as an All Japan television taping, at Memorial Hall. There was Geigel, in the lobby, coming out of the bathroom, holding a toilet plunger that he'd just used. The first thing we thought of was that could you imagine Vince McMahon or Jim Herd (who was running WCW at the time) with a dirty toilet plunger walking around the lobby in front of the fans at a major television taping? But that was the wrestling he came from, not about putting on suit and tie and looking like a businessman, but wearing jeans and flip flops, doing the dirty work yourself, and running a small business with limited appeal.

In 1982, when Muchnick retired, and sold his majority stock to Geigel, Race, O'Connor and Gagne, they quickly ran one of the most successful wrestling cities in the world into the ground. Even though Geigel wrestled in St. Louis as early as 1950, and was a regular undercard and mid-carder during the 60s and 70s, he never figured out what made the city tick.

The problems at first were little. Muchnick always insisted on \$5,000 in the bank account at all times, and every bill was paid the day it came in. With Muchnick gone, the partners split up what was in the bank account right away, and when Matysik would get mad about not having anything in the account to pay bills, he would just say they'd hold off paying and pay it from the gate of the next show. Matysik quit once, but Geigel gave him a bonus to return.

The big blow-off came on February 11, 1983, when a Flair vs. Bruiser Brody match, taped for NTV in Japan, drew 16,695 fans and set the city's all-time gate record. By traditional St. Louis standards, both Flair and Brody should have each received \$7,303.59 for the match,

gigantic single match pay for that era. WWF champion Bob Backlund in that era would get \$5,000 for selling out Madison Square Garden. Before he had retired, Bruno Sammartino would get \$6,000 for an MSG sellout. Geigel wrote Flair and Brody both checks for \$5,958.81.

"I'll never forget that conversation," Matysik said. "Geigel said, 'No wrestler is worth more than \$6,000 for a match.'"

When Brody found out, he said that there would come a time he'd get back at them. Brody and Kimala (as James Harris' Ugandan Giant gimmick's name was originally spelled) ended up as a hot program in Texas. Geigel booked the two of them into Des Moines and Kansas City and did record gates in both cities. Brody no-showed Des Moines. Geigel freaked out and had people call to find out what was happening. Brody then said he wouldn't come to Kansas City unless he got his percentage of the Des Moines house that was sold using his name, plus, in advance, he wanted the money he was owed for the St. Louis match.

Matysik, who was General Manager, co-booker and television announcer, quit for a second time, and started his own promotion against them. He argued that once the word got out that they cheated the headliners on pay, which was not uncommon in wrestling, but St. Louis had a reputation for paying to the penny on the percentage, that the reputation of St. Louis as a special city would be destroyed.

"I actually notified the partners I was done the day after the Checkerdom show," Matysik wrote in his book, "The Golden Era: The St. Louis Wrestling Record Book 1959 to 1983." "They were shocked even after our difficult year together. Truthfully, I was sick about it myself. Harley Race, Bob Geigel and Pat O'Connor all did their best with what they knew about wrestling. Sadly, their background was totally different from mine with Sam Muchnick. In the end, I had no status as a stockholder if the promotion drifted more and more in a direction opposite from what St. Louis had always been. Plus, the NWA was a shadow of what it had been. For me, it was time to move in a different direction."

At the time, the television show was doing 100,000 viewers per week just in the St. Louis area, being the most watched locally produced television show in the market except the local news and St. Louis Cardinals baseball. A year-and-a-half later, the institution locally that Wrestling at the Chase had been, had gotten so bad that there was a taping where fans were walking out because it was so boring. KPLR-TV sent a letter to the promotion, saying that if fans were walking out on camera when the show was being filmed, that when it airs, most likely fans will be changing the channel. At the end of 1983, KPLR-TV canceled television from the St. Louis Wrestling Club, to take a \$2,100 per week offer for the time slot from Vince McMahon. But even if McMahon hadn't have expanded at that time, they were still going to be canceled and Matysik would have probably gotten the slot.

The promotion crumbled, unable to create programs that drew. They still had some sellouts, even with weaker television and competing head-on with McMahon, but it was only if they matched Flair with Kerry Von Erich (the hottest program off the Dallas TV that aired in the market) or Bruiser Brody (who also appeared on the Dallas TV, but was a major star for years in St. Louis and Flair vs. Brody was an angle set up by Matysik). You could only go to those matches over-and-over so many times before they lost their magic.

On September 20, 1985, about 1,300 fans attended a show at Kiel Auditorium headlined by Flair vs. Race for the NWA title, the same match that sold 18,000 tickets and turned people away a few years earlier. Through 1983, Flair was the single best drawing world champion ever in St. Louis, even beating out Lou Thesz, Buddy Rogers and Bill Longson. But by 1985, with the new philosophy, he was the lowest drawing champion ever. The show even had a strong undercard that included Brody vs. One Man Gang, Rick Martel vs. Jimmy Garvin for the AWA title, and Crusher Blackwell vs. Kamala in a bodyslam contest. But all the local flavor was gone and fans growing up on a certain style of wrestling, didn't, with familiar names, still pay

attention to this. They had stopped taping TV in St. Louis so the weaker Ch. 30 that they were running on was airing the Kansas City show with localized promos. They taped the promos ahead of time, so would have wrestlers talking in interviews about matches on tape before the matches would take place. Sometimes, if a finish didn't go as planned, or somebody no-showed, the fans would hear them talk about matches and things that didn't happen. In some markets, perhaps that wouldn't be so bad, but this was a fan base that grew up with the closest thing in the U.S. to Japanese wrestling.

"It (the September 20, 1985 show) was a tough deal for us," said Geigel. "We had a lot of big houses, but we also had a few (lousy) ones, as well. I had just stepped down as NWA President and then this happened. After years of selling the building out, the WWF was killing us and we were losing our shirts. We couldn't pay the guys. We couldn't even pay the bills. As much as I didn't want to deal with (Crockett), in order to keep St. Louis alive, we had to make some hard choices."

That was the final show of the St. Louis Wrestling Club, the company Muchnick had formed in the 1940s. Jim Crockett Promotions took over the city at that point for the NWA, and it became, as it had become with WWF as well, just a stop on the tour, with no unique identity or outside talent. It was the end of an era, yet almost nobody points to that show as the end of anything. Those who would remember such things had already checked out. Most longtime fans will categorize the real end at some point during the prior two or so years, whenever they left a show or watched a TV show and lost interest, since so few of even the die-hards were still around at the end.

The WWF struggled for years in the market as well, although they outdrew the NWA most of the time. Still, their ratings declined to the point that KPLR-TV eventually canceled wrestling altogether.

But the reality was, that day was inevitable because of the change in the industry. Had Muchnick been younger and not retired, the transition would have probably been different, but the end result would have been the same, because that was how the business was changing. Jack Tunney in Toronto had already become part of the WWF. In 1987, Paul Boesch, a similarly respected local promoter in Houston, made a deal with WWF that ended up putting him personally out of the business by the end of the year, because the economics weren't working out.

On a national basis, the most famous modern memory of Geigel may have been in 1986, in two vignettes that set up the Magnum T.A. vs. Nikita Koloff best-of-seven series (this is where the best-of-seven became famous) for the vacant U.S. title.

Magnum was the champion, and got into a brawl with Koloff after Koloff had insulted his mother. Geigel announced that Magnum starting the fight with Koloff was conduct unbecoming a champion. But he said under the circumstances, would not fine or suspend him, essentially understanding the situation. But he said the NWA Board voted to reprimand him. Magnum complained that strict interpretation of the rules should be given leeway when you insult somebody's mother, but Geigel talked about conduct unbecoming a champion. Magnum then decked Geigel. This led to Geigel stripping Magnum of the title for attacking an NWA official, leading to the best-of-seven.

Geigel was also used in 1983 in Florida, more as a babyface, for the Midnight Rider angle. Dusty Rhodes had lost a loser leaves town match to Kevin Sullivan on Christmas night, when Jake Roberts, dressed up as Santa Claus, interfered. Rhodes came back as the Midnight Rider, under a mask. Dillon, the lead heel manager, argued that Rhodes was not allowed in Florida yet he was headlining every show. Geigel announced that the NWA allows men to wear masks and if it was proven that Rhodes was the Midnight Rider, then Rhodes would be gone for violating his suspension. This led to bounty hunters to get the mask, where Dillon would be befuddled at every turn.

Finally, there was a showdown, the "Night of the Mask," in Miami Beach, a cage match with Ric Flair defending the world title against the Midnight Rider's mask. There were only two endings possible, Flair losing the title, or Rider unmasking, revealing Rhodes, and it being the end of Rhodes' career. Rider won and people believed they saw a world title change.

On TV, Geigel made the announcement that while the NWA allows men to wear masks, in the case of the world championship, he, as president, had to know the man's identity. He said the Midnight Rider refused to unmask, because everyone knew if Geigel knew it was Rhodes, then Rhodes would be banned from the NWA. Geigel said he understood, but that because of that, the title was returning to Flair. Geigel was portrayed as a fair president who did what he had to do, and that he knew full well it was Rhodes under the mask and still didn't suspend him, but in the end, he couldn't let it go so far as to allow him to be world champion.

But wrestling changed and the days of the small territories were over, particularly weak territories. The strong markets were able, through presenting a product local fans liked me, to stave off Vince McMahon's early attempts in their areas. But fans in weak territories, like the Central States, went crazy for seeing a far more major league WWF product.

McMahon did offer to buy Geigel out in Kansas City early on, largely to get access to his local TV deals and be the only game in town. Geigel said the offer was insultingly low and turned it down. Instead, the territory limped to its grave a few years later.

For all real purposes, the NWA was becoming Jim Crockett Promotions. Geigel was able to draw big crowds when Crockett sent in his big guns, but it was the Crockett guys who were the draws. At one point, with Geigel's territory just about dead, Crockett essentially took it over, with the idea of Central States as his satellite territory, a circuit to develop talent. But the idea of running a full circuit around developmental guys at a time when fans saw the big stars weekly on television was doomed. The idea lost tons of money in a short period of time. Unlike today, where developmental is a necessity for long-term survival and there are numerous revenue streams, the losses were too much for Crockett to cover, particularly when his core cities were declining and paying for television time was putting him deep in red ink.

After Crockett pulled out, Geigel restarted his promotion, dropping out of the NWA and forming the WWA. He ran about a year, including using a young Masahiro Chono as his world champion in 1988, but folded later that year.

After wrestling, Geigel, Bulldog Bob Brown, Mike George and Rufus Jones (Carey Lloyd), all big area stars of the 70s, worked security at the Woodlands Racetrack in Kansas City. Jones passed away in 1993 at the age of 60, and Brown passed away four years later at the age of 58.

Geigel continued to work there part-time until 2008, loving to talk daily with the clientele that remembered the simpler days of All-Star Wrestling. He was a regular at the Cauliflower Alley Club, where he'd go with the likes of Roger Kirby, Tom Andersen (Andrews/Intern) and TV announcer Bill Kersten every year, until his health prevented him from going this year.

Haggerty beat Kiniski to get control of both belts on August 26, 1961 in St. Paul; lost to Dale Lewis & Pat Kennedy (Bobby Graham) November 16, 1961 Rochester, MN; w/Otto Von Krupp (Larry Simon/Boris Malenko) def. Dale Lewis & Pat Kennedy November 23, 1961 Rochester, MN; w/Stan Kowalski def. Larry Hennig & Duke Hoffman February 19, 1962 Minneapolis

NWA CENTRAL STATES HEAVYWEIGHT: def. Cowboy Bob Ellis in tournament final for vacant title October 31, 1958 St. Joseph; lost to Cowboy Bob Ellis November 28, 1958 St. Joseph; def. Pat O'Connor in tournament final for vacant title June 19, 1964; lost to Sonny Myers October 16, 1964; def. Sonny Myers January 14, 1966 St. Joseph; lost to Ron Reed (Buddy Colt) February 18, 1966 St. Joseph; beat Sonny Myers June 4, 1967 St. Joseph; lost to The Hangman October 27, 1967 St. Joseph; def. The Hangman November 17, 1967 St. Joseph; lost to Sonny Myers December 12, 1967 St. Joseph; def. Roger Kirby January 1, 1971 St. Joseph; lost to Harley Race January 1971

NWA WORLD TAG TEAM (Central States version): w/Lee Henning def. Ernie & Emil Dusek April 1960; lost to George & Sandy Scott April 29, 1960 St. Joseph; w/Rufus Jones def. Tokyo Joe & Great Togo (Haruka Eigen) June 1973; lost to Tokyo Joe & Great Togo 1973; w/Rufus Jones def. Bulldog Bob Brown & Lord Al Hayes June 1974; lost to Masked Interns June 13, 1974 Kansas City; w/Pat O'Connor def. Masked Interns July 4, 1974 Kansas City; lost to Masked Interns July 18, 1974 Kansas City (Omar Atlas replaced Geigel as O'Connor's partner); w/Akio Sato def. Dutch Mantell & Ron Bass February 19, 1976 St. Joseph; Vacated titles 1976

NWA WORLD TAG TEAM (Texas version): w/Dory Funk Sr. def. Art Nelson & Rip Rogers (Eddie Graham) November 22, 1956 Amarillo; Funk chose Rip Rogers as partner when Geigel left Texas February 1957

NWA NORTH AMERICAN TAG TEAM (Central States version): w/Big Bill Miller def. Pat O'Connor & Sonny Myers February 20, 1964 Kansas City; lost to Pat O'Connor & Sonny Myers May 22, 1964 Kansas City; w/Dutch Savage def. Doug Gilbert & Ron Reed (Buddy Colt) May 27, 1965 Kansas City; Vacated July 1975; w/Bulldog Bob Brown won tournament for vacant titles August 1965 Amarillo (tournament was likely fictitious); lost to Cowboy Bob Ellis & The Stomper (Archie Gouldie) May 19, 1966 Kansas City; w/Bulldog Bob Brown def. The Viking & Dandy Jack Donovan September 22, 1966 Kansas City; lost to Ronnie Etchison & Sonny Myers June 16, 1967 St. Joseph; w/Bulldog Bob Brown def. Cowboy Bob Ellis & The Viking October 19, 1967 Kansas City; lost to Ronnie Etchison & Klondike Bill January 11, 1968 Kansas City; w/Bulldog Bob Brown def. Ronnie Etchison & Klondike Bill February 1, 1968 Kansas City; lost to Ronnie Etchison & Sonny Myers May 9, 1968 Kansas City; w/Bulldog Bob Brown def. Ronnie Etchison & Sonny Myers September 5, 1968 Kansas City; lost to Tommy & Terry Martin (Leo & Romeo Cormier aka Leo Burke & Bobby Kay) October 31, 1968 Kansas City; w/The Viking def. Dick Murdoch & Dusty Rhodes December 27, 1968 Kansas City; lost to Dick Murdoch & K.O. Kox (Bruiser Bob Sweetan) May 8, 1969 Kansas City; w/The Stomper def. Killer Karl Kox & K.O. Kox February 16, 1970; lost to Killer Karl Kox & K.O. Kox March 4, 1970; w/The Stomper def. Killer Karl Kox & K.O. Kox April 13, 1970 St. Joseph; lost to Killer Karl Kox & K.O. Kox April 20, 1970 St. Joseph; w/The Stomper def. John Tolos & Baron Von Heisinger April 9, 1971; lost to Bob Orton Sr. & Buddy Austin June 1971; w/Rufus Jones def. Roger Kirby & Harley Race February 1, 1973 Kansas City; lost to Great Togo & Tokyo Joe March 8 1973 Kansas City

NWA UNITED STATES HEAVYWEIGHT (Central States version): def. Luther Lindsay March 21, 1963 Kansas City; lost to Rock Hunter June 28, 1963 St. Joseph; def. Sonny Myers June 20, 1964 Waterloo; lost to Bob Orton Sr. October 17, 1964 Waterloo

NWA IOWA HEAVYWEIGHT: def. Jim Dobie January 7, 1957; lost to Bobby Bruns January 1957; def. Bobby Bruns January 17, 1957 Cedar Rapids; Title dropped in 1961

BOB GEIGEL CAREER TITLE HISTORY

AWA WORLD TAG TEAM: Picked as tag team partner by Hard Boiled Haggerty after Haggerty & Gene Kiniski were champions, split up and

AWA CANADIAN OPEN TAG TEAM: w/Big Bill Miller def. Ilio DiPaolo & Joe Scarpello June 28, 1962; Titles vacated 1963

AWA MIDWEST TAG TEAM: w/The Viking (Robert Morse) def. Chris Tolos & Stan Pulaski March 8, 1969 Omaha; lost to Cowboy Bob Ellis & Stan Pulaski July 12, 1969 Omaha

NWA NORTH AMERICAN HEAVYWEIGHT (Texas version): def. Don Curtis May 9, 1957 Amarillo; lost to Mike DiBiase August 15, 1957 Amarillo

NWA NORTH AMERICAN TAG TEAM (Texas version): w/Dory Funk Sr. held titles 1960; lost to Art Nelson & Nick Roberts June 9, 1960

NWA SOUTHWEST STATES HEAVYWEIGHT: def. Roy Heffernan December 29, 1955; lost to Sonny Myers; def. Bob Orton Sr. September 19, 1956 Lubbock; lost to Dizzy Davis October 25, 1956 Amarillo; def. Buddy Rogers May 13, 1958; Vacated title when leaving territory

NWA SOUTHWEST STATES TAG TEAM: w/Doc Gallagher def. Gori Guerrero & Pepper Gomez October 20, 1954 Lubbock; lost to Jesse & Johnny James November 10, 1954 Lubbock; w/Eric Pederson (Fritz Von Goering) def. Jesse & Johnny James December 1954; Titles vacated January 1955; w/Boris Kameronoff def. Jesse & Johnny James in tournament final for vacant title January 31, 1955 Abilene; lost to Dory Funk Sr. & Cowboy Carlson March 13, 1955 Amarillo; w/Mike Gallagher def. Frankie Hill Murdoch & Jim Austeri August 29, 1955 Abilene; lost to Dizzy Davis & Art Nelson October 10, 1955 Abilene

NWA SOUTHWEST STATES JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT: def. Pepper Gomez in 24-man tournament final September 30, 1954 Amarillo; lost to Roy Heffernan October 27, 1955 Amarillo

AWA NORTH DAKOTA HEAVYWEIGHT: def Aldo Bogni November 23, 1960; No record of losing the title

NOVEMBER 24, 2014

A note regarding our story on Bob Geigel and the timeline of the end of the St. Louis Wrestling Club producing Wrestling at the Chase. The final NWA St. Louis produced Wrestling at the Chase was on September 10, 1983. After that, in an attempt to save money, Geigel and the other owners decided it would be cheaper to just use the tape they did in Kansas City for the rest of their circuit, and insert interviews for St. Louis sent in by the headliners. The funny part of that is the show didn't cost that much money because the station in its deal not only produced the show, but paid the promotion \$1,500 per taping. With trans costs and payoffs for talent, it wasn't making any money, but it was a better deal than most promotions of that era had, where the promoter would pay for all the costs of television and make the money back in ticket sales to the house shows. In November, due to bad shows and declining ratings, the station sent the promotion notice they were canceling at the end of the year. At the time, Ted Koplar Jr., the son of the man who made the original deal with Sam Muchnick for the show in 1959, was in talks with both Larry Matysik and Vince McMahon, and ultimately chose McMahon. McMahon did his first studio taping in December, which included the debuts in WWF of Hulk Hogan, Gene Okerlund, David Schultz and Roddy Piper. That was the day it became clear that the reason Bob Backlund shockingly lost the WWF title to the Iron Sheik in Madison Square Garden the night before, was because Hogan was coming in to be the top guy. By January, McMahon used the St. Louis show as his flagship syndicated show, called Wrestling at the Chase in St. Louis, and Superstars everywhere else, and at first taped matches from his live arena events in St. Louis, before eventually taping all over North America.

DECEMBER 1, 2014

Some more notes on the 1983 St. Louis scene as it related to the death of the St. Louis Wrestling Club, and Vince McMahon getting the "Wrestling at the Chase" traditional slot after Bob Geigel, Harley Race, Pat O'Connor and Verne Gagne purchased controlling interest from Sam Muchnick. Muchnick had retired on what ended up being the biggest show up to that point in the city's history (some would argue from a local and mainstream standpoint the biggest ever, as they sold out with just under 20,000 fans at the Checkerdome and it sold out so far in advance that they probably could have drawn closer to 30,000), on January 1, 1982, shortly after his wife passed away. Larry Matysik, who took over as General Manager after Muchnick retired, as well as being television announcer and being co-booker, had left the St. Louis Wrestling Club twice over the previous two years. The first time shortly after the takeover because of the change in direction the new owners were taking the business that he thought was not for the better, which in hindsight, it clearly wasn't. He came back, and put together the Ric Flair vs. Bruiser Brody match which set the city's all-time gate record. He then quit when Geigel made the call to pay Flair and Brody less than they should have based on St. Louis' traditional percentage. Matysik started on his own with the backing of Delaware North and Charlie Mancuso, who was the manager of the Checkerdome. They ran a few shows, and drew between 4,500 and 6,700, which was pretty impressive for an indie, using Brody, Randy Savage, Tully Blanchard, Dick Murdoch and other talent largely from Southwest Championship Wrestling. The key was the traditional time slot on KPLR television was opening up. Geigel stopped taping in St. Louis, thinking it would be a cost-savings measure to just send in his Kansas City tapes and add in localized promos. The first show from Kansas City aired on September 17, 1983. Ratings for a show that, dating back to 1959, was one of the highest rated locally produced shows in the market (the Sunday replays during the heyday would duel the NFL evenly) plummeted and KPLR made the decision to drop the promotion. Both Matysik and Vince McMahon (who was about to expand, but few truly knew it at the time) were vying for the slot. McMahon had offered the station \$2,100 per week plus five percent of every live house in St. Louis to get the slot. Ted Koplar, the station manager, who negotiated the original handshake deal that I'm not even sure was ever formalized with a contract, with Muchnick, in 1959, then brought McMahon, Matysik and Mancuso together at the steak house at the Chase Hotel in late October. Koplar said that the best thing for the station and for St. Louis wrestling was for Matysik and McMahon to work together, one had the talent and organization, and the other understood the local market, and as the announcer from the glory days, had the connection with the local fans. He said that the area fans wanted Matysik as the voice and face, but Vince had the talent and said to Vince at the meeting that he felt he was "the most dynamic promoter I've ever met (this was long before Vince had garnered any reputation as a promoter)." Koplar said it would be the perfect team. At the meeting, the agreement was a 50/50 deal on St. Louis, with McMahon buying out Mancuso and Delaware North, essentially for the money they spent to start up Greater St. Louis Wrestling Enterprises, which was Matysik's group. The next morning, Vince flew to Minneapolis, where Hulk Hogan was living, and actually secretly signed him. The day after that, Jim Barnett called Matysik and said Vince's financial situation wouldn't allow him to do a 50/50 deal. He said Vince didn't understand his finances when he made the agreement but that he had promised Vince Sr. to watch over for his son and make sure he doesn't make bad deals and put the company under. He then offered Matysik a salary and a percentage of the St. Louis shows, which Matysik turned down at first. Matysik for the next few months had meetings with both Geigel and talks with McMahon. McMahon came into St. Louis with Hogan vs. John Studd and sold out Kiel Auditorium and had a closed-circuit overflow without anyone's help. The show was such a success that immediately, the WWF became the dominant promotion in town. A few weeks later, McMahon flew Matysik to New York for the Hogan vs. Iron Sheik title change. Matysik also met with Geigel and Race at Muchnick's place. Muchnick advised Matysik to go with Vince, although at that point McMahon's offer no longer included a percentage of the local shows. McMahon also never paid Mancuso or Delaware North anything, but

by January, that was likely understood since that deal was already reneged on in October. Barnett was the key guy behind-the-scenes for Vince in those early years, particularly on the television side since he had so many contacts from his days in the 50s as Fred Kohler's assistant and later running his huge U.S. promotion (Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, Colorado and with the offshoot group in California headed by Roy Shire). Barnett was the conduit in the deal where McMahon sold Georgia Championship Wrestling (which by that point no longer existed as a separate company, but had the TV contract with TBS) to Crockett for \$1 million, a great deal for McMahon since Ted Turner was about to kick him off the air so he was going to get nothing for his contract. He was tied in with Turner and knew Vince was going to be kicked off as soon as the contract expired in 1986, so Vince sold to Crockett. This actually screwed with Bill Watts, who had a verbal agreement with Turner that they would go national together using TBS as the launching pad. Turner figured that Crockett would provide his station with the wrestling programming his audience would like, since the McMahon product didn't do well, and asked Watts to step aside, even though Mid South Wrestling on TBS had averaged a 5.3 rating in an unfamiliar time slot and was the highest rated show on cable of any kind. In around 1987, for reasons I've never been fully clear of, McMahon fired Barnett, who had been his Director of Operations since 1983 (Barnett handled the wrestler payoffs, and no matter what later legend may claim, both Hogan and Andre the Giant got \$750,000 for WrestleMania III), when he came aboard shortly after Ole Anderson forced him out of Georgia. It must have been for a good reason since McMahon wasn't all that popular then, and nobody ever told me he screwed Barnett. Barnett then attempted suicide, although most feel it was a worked attempt at suicide and he had no intention of killing himself, and had made sure to time it when someone would find him. Soon thereafter, Crockett hired Barnett. In 1988, Turner Broadcasting was negotiating to buy Crockett Promotions, which was heavily in debt. After having its most successful year ever in 1986, JCP started running into trouble the next year due to overspending, a combination of living high, being screwed out of expected money from PPV by McMahon's maneuverings and a big decline in house show business from a combination of running with a talented pat hand for too long, and shortsighted main event finishes that ran off the fans. He also had negotiated high dollar contracts with all of his top talent to keep them from going to WWF, figuring he'd be able to make the money by presenting four PPV's a year and figuring 350,000 buys for each show. Well, that never happened. The cost of his TV network were also high and he never got the ad revenue he expected from having so much television. Crockett and Dusty Rhodes had left Charlotte to run out of expensive offices in Dallas. Jack Petrik, who came from St. Louis and had worked with Muchnick in the television business, was put in charge of wrestling, and he hired Jim Herd, a former Pizza Hut executive who had worked as a Director of Wrestling at the Chase and was close with Muchnick, as well as been a program director in St. Louis. Even though Herd had learned wrestling from running Muchnick's show, I don't know that he ever understood why the brand of wrestling was so successful. Herd was going to hire Matysik (still working for McMahon) to book and be in charge of creative. I'm not sure what happened there, but Barnett managed to put a stop to that and somehow buried Matysik. Matysik still got an offer, but it was for less than half of what they later offered Joe Pedecino of all people, and it would have required him to move to Atlanta, and did not involve booking, so that fell through. TBS instead hired Blackjack Mulligan, who almost immediately quit, then George Scott, who was fired a few months later, and never got out of the blocks until the Nitro era.

APRIL 3, 2016

Joe Garagiola was a self-professed mediocre major league baseball player during a major league career that spanned from 1946 to 1954, but he ended up being one of the most famous players in the history of the St. Louis Cardinals franchise.

When he passed away at the age of 90 on 3/23, to very significant mainstream media attention, something few today knew, but something he never forgot, was his role in what was, to borrow a

misleading phrase, the beginnings of one of the longest running weekly episodic television shows in American television history.

Garagiola was the first host of "Wrestling at the Chase," which ran weekly from 1959 to 1983 produced by the St. Louis Wrestling Club, a tenure Monday Night Raw won't reach until May 2017 at the earliest, longer if you include the period WWE ran using the same name.

The show was such a local institution that when Vince McMahon purchased the time slot at the end of 1983, he continued to use the name "Wrestling at the Chase" as the name of the television show in St. Louis.

McMahon originally made a deal with station General Manager Ted Koplar that he and Larry Matysik would be partners in promoting the arena events and doing the television in St. Louis, a deal that McMahon immediately reneged on.

It was on McMahon's very first episode of "Wrestling at the Chase," on December 27, 1983, actually taped at the famed Khorassan Room at the Chase Hotel, the first time in 11 years that building had housed wrestling, that he introduced Hulk Hogan, David Shults, Gene Okerlund and Roddy Piper (the first three who no-showed Verne Gagne's annual sold out Christmas show in St. Paul two nights earlier before 18,000 fans). It was essentially the official declaration of war on the NWA and AWA, and McMahon did it in what was considered the home market of the NWA, and against a promotion that at the time was owned 25 percent by Verne Gagne.

Not only that, but for a few years after that, even though the show was called "Superstars of Wrestling" (a term Howard Finkel came up with in a discussion with Matysik on names for the show to pitch to Vince McMahon, and later, "WWF Superstars" nationally when George Cannon sued over the fact he had prior usage of Superstars of Wrestling), and had long since moved from the Chase Hotel, and later even from St. Louis (the syndicated show for a time in 1984 was taped in St. Louis), it was the only city where McMahon retained the well-known local name for his wrestling show. It was done because Koplar insisted on it. At one point, when ratings were falling, McMahon actually for a time had Matysik announce the syndicated show just for KPLR-TV, the only market he used the local announcer associated with wrestling instead of his own announcers. But that didn't save the show, as even though they were getting paid \$2,100 per week for the time, the station canceled WWF wrestling due to the declining ratings.

"Wrestling at the Chase," from its onset drew nearly 200,000 viewers per week on average even though it aired on only one medium-sized market independent television station, in a metropolitan area of barely two million people, at the time the show debuted on May 23, 1959.

The show was unique in wrestling history, at first broadcast from the opulent Khorassan Room of the Chase Park Plaza Hotel, the premier hotel in the city. The 800-seat ballroom was filled with mostly older adults, men in suits and ties, and women in evening gowns. It looked more like a crowd going to the opera. The upscale audience looked foreign to most of the wrestlers who appeared in the building for the first time and thought they must have taken the wrong drive from a different planet.

"The role of Joe Garagiola as the original announcer on Wrestling at the Chase cannot be minimized," wrote Matysik in his book, "Glory Days: The St. Louis Record Book." "He was the right guy in the right place at the right time. Joe added even more legitimacy to the product, which already had the boost of being in the prestigious Chase Hotel. But Joe was a hometown hero, a baseball star eventually slowed by injury, who was then broadcasting the Cardinal games with Harry Caray (as well as Jack Buck) on powerful radio station KMOX. In addition, Garagiola was funny. He cracked jokes, but not at the expense of the esteem Joe showed for what the wrestlers did inside the ring. Joe found the balance between humor and serious. When Joe heckled bad guys like Rip Hawk and Gene Kiniski, and they barked back at Joe, the audience was enthralled. It was like the bench jockeys at a baseball game in that era of modern trash-talking. Joe's interviews with the likes of Pat O'Connor and Lou Thesz were always serious and

respectful. It hit just the right tone and helped wrestling carve a spot in the culture of St. Louis.”

St. Louis had been a major wrestling city as far back as anyone can remember. One of the biggest matches in wrestling history, the title unification match with Joe Stecher vs. Strangler Lewis, the two world champions of warring promotions, who had avoided each other for years, took place in the city in 1928, under promoter Tom Packs. In 1932, after the *St. Louis Times* newspaper he worked for as a sportswriter went out of business, Sam Muchnick, a writer known for his ability to make friends (among them being Babe Ruth, Dizzy Dean and Al Capone) took a job working as the head of public relations for Packs. He quickly became the No. 2 man in the promotion, sometimes traveling with the world champion, and handling booking and finances.

But Muchnick and Packs had a falling out. Muchnick handled the publicity in building a sold out heavyweight boxing championship bout in St. Louis between Joe Louis and Tony Musto in 1941. Packs gave him a \$200 bonus for his work. Muchnick felt insulted, quit, and started opposition to perhaps the most powerful promoter in the U.S.

During the 40s, St. Louis very clearly was the wrestling capital in North America. One could argue that as the case from 1937, and it remained a top wrestling city through the late 50s, but had a rough few years from 1957 to mid-1959.

In the 40s, it was the home base of the era's biggest drawing card, and the most unheralded major attraction in U.S. pro wrestling history, Wild Bill Longson, and his rivalries with the likes of Lou Thesz, Sandor Szabo, Ray Steele, Yvon Robert, Warren Bockwinkel (Nick's father), The Swedish Angel, Earl McCready, Iron Talun (a 6-foot-8, 320 pound giant who was a major draw in that era), Strangler Lewis, Paul Boesch, Buddy Rogers, Bobby Managoff and a big drawing boxer vs. wrestler feud with former heavyweight boxer George "K.O." Koverly (who actually was not even a name in boxing, only having had few boxing matches we can find, but was a well-known tough guy who became a major heel of the era), who became a pro wrestler. Even though television had yet to be invented, there may have only been a few wrestlers in history who ever had the consistent drawing power for years that Longson had who averaged just under 10,000 paid at Kiel Auditorium every two or three weeks for several years in a row, some against some of the biggest legends in wrestling history, but he also sold out against guys nobody ever remembers like Barto Hill.

From 1941 to 1946, Longson, with St. Louis being his key city, drew more than double the number of 10,000-plus crowds of anyone in wrestling every single year. He remained No. 1 in 1947, was No. 2 behind Gorgeous George in 1948 and remained at the top tier through 1951.

After Packs suffered gambling losses and he needed quick cash, he sold the existing promotion to a combine led by his top star, Thesz. Because the idea of the world champion also owning the promotion would be looked upon with skepticism, to the public, the head of the promotion was Martin Thesz, Lou's father. Muchnick struggled running opposition, and didn't fare that well, drawing about 2,000 fans per show, relying on past their prime but legendary shooters like Lewis, Dick Shikat, Ray Steele and John Pesek, and amateur champions like Ed Virag, Ruffy Silverstein, Roy Dunn and Cliff Gustafson. Still, Muchnick was ahead of his time as he booked Gorgeous George as a main eventer the year before he exploded on television, and George drew well for him.

But in the late 40s, Muchnick became one of the key players in forming the National Wrestling Alliance. While the National Wrestling Alliance name had been used in the 40s for a promotion in Kansas City and Iowa, the famous version was born in a hotel room in 1948 in Waterloo when a number of promoters decided to work together and trade talent. Thesz and Muchnick were at war with Thesz's side winning at first, until Muchnick, through his NWA relationship was able to broker a deal with Jack Pfefer of Toledo to get Buddy Rogers in regularly. Rogers was such an attraction that the gap closed. Thesz said that between wrestling full-time as world champion of the rival National Wrestling Association and trying promoting, he was having no time for

things like sleep, and called Muchnick for a truce. At first, the public believed the two promotions were still operating independently, but now trading talent. In actuality, the two different promotions in town were actually the same, with Muchnick owning 51 percent, and handling the promotion so Thesz could tour as world champion.

Muchnick quickly became the NWA's voice and president as the group became the lead sanctioning body of the sport. Muchnick was arguably the most powerful figure in the industry from 1950 to 1975, and booked the NWA world champion, the most recognized champion in the industry. Thesz remained its touring world champion, with one short interlude in 1956, until asking out in 1957 because he felt the NWA didn't see the big picture with the rise of Japan.

In the early 50s, pro wrestling was booming due to the network coverage of the sport, but in most places, it struggled in the late 50s, until making a comeback with the rise of UHF stations looking for something that would draw an audience, something that well promoted wrestling was usually quite good at.

St. Louis had no televised wrestling for several years and business was tough. Jim Barnett noted that Muchnick survived the lean times better than most because he had great relationships with the local sportswriters, so he got more newspaper coverage than most promoters. Even more important to his success, he had thousands of local subscribers to his newsletter, which doubled as the program for the shows, that he'd mail out to subscribers well in advance of the shows to hype his upcoming card. St. Louis was known for having the best written programs of the era, and the newsletter was a key and unique part of the promotion into the 80s.

Still, in the switch from Thesz to Dick Hutton as world champion, even the world title matches were doing 4,500 to 5,500 fans, and the regular cards were doing even worse.

Still, Muchnick paid well, turned a profit every year, and noted that while they were not getting rich running wrestling in the late 50s, they were doing better than average person at the time.

KPLR was a fledgling independent television station that was trying to fill time with local programming, anything that would get them an audience. Harold Koplar, the station president (whose son was running the station when the deal with McMahon and Matysik was made), happened to be sitting next to Muchnick on a flight and they talked about the potential for wrestling on the station. The two worked out a business agreement on a piece of paper on the flight, and decided on The Chase Hotel, the most well-known and high class hotel in the city, which Koplar also owned, as the location. KPLR would pay for production, set aside money for the talent working the show, and provide Muchnick with spots to promote his arena shows, where the money was made. Muchnick would pay KPLR a percentage of the gate of the house shows. They both estimated what those numbers would entail and figured that the production costs and money paid to talent would balance out with their percentage of the house.

"I thought, what a concept," said Garagiola. "This is so different. Wrestling at the Khorassan Room. But I tell you, it turned out to be an event."

From 1959 to the end of 1981, when Muchnick retired, they worked on the terms of the agreement made on the piece of paper on the plane. The two shook hands, and as crazy as this is to believe, they never had a formal contract, and never even talked about signing one, such was the level of respect and trust both had for the other.

Almost immediately, crowds at the 11,000-seat Kiel Auditorium were usually topping 9,000, using headlines like Thesz, at that point the former champion, world champion Pat O'Connor, former champions Hutton, Longson, and Whipper Billy Watson, along with the three men Garagiola credited for the show's initial success, top heels Gene Kiniski and Rip Hawk and colorful big drawing babyface Cowboy Bob Ellis (who Garagiola nicknamed "The Women's Delight" because he drew so many women to the matches).

Other top regulars on "Wrestling at the Chase" during the Garagiola era included Johnny Valentine, Fritz Von Erich, Kinji Shibuya, Johnny Weaver, John Paul Henning, Pepper Gomez, Stan Stasiak, Duke Keomuka, Taro Myake, Wilbur Snyder, Rogers, Killer Kowalski and the local tag team of Guy Brunetti & Joe Tangaro.

Garagiola was no wrestling expert. But he was glib, charming and self-deprecating. A few years later, after NBC made him one of their key personalities, he was considered one of the funniest men on television. He worked in the role because the audience liked him and trusted him. He came across like your neighbor you'd go out for beers with who would keep you in stitches all night, which is why he had so much success in virtually every broadcasting endeavor he tried.

"All I do is kid it along and try to act funny," Garagiola said in a 1960 article when the *Pittsburgh Press* covered the former baseball player as a wrestling announcer (Pie Traynor, one of the Pirates all-time greatest players later announced wrestling in Pittsburgh). "Everyone seems to like it. The sponsors like it and the fans like it."

While he joked around through the matches, it wasn't at the expense of the talent. He'd argue back and forth with the heels, and exude great respect for the babyfaces. As the voice of the Cardinals, the cities primary sports franchise, and a former local star athlete himself, in his mid-30s and not far removed from being big leaguer, if he'd put over Thesz or O'Connor as great skilled top tier athletes, the audience believed they must be. If he put over how women loved Ellis, with all the dressed up women in the audience, well, it must be true and was true.

In an early angle, Gorgeous George was on the show and began plugging a record album he had just done. Hawk, who was going to wrestle George, suddenly came up with the idea he'd break it over George's head, figuring that George would know what he was doing and Garagiola, who didn't know, would freak out, which would make it come across as real. Then, when he did it, the record didn't break. He tried to hit George with it over-and-over, Garagiola started calling him a madman, and he started yelling at Garagiola calling him a Spaghetti eater.

Garagiola learned that his role worked best when he'd argue back-and-forth with the heels, because that's when everyone in town would talk about it and the ratings would increase. Sometimes they did so in a manner that not only fooled the public, but even Muchnick. Even Muchnick thought Hawk (who would call Garagiola a "Spaghetti Bender" and Garagiola would call Hawk "Barney Rubble") and Kiniski and Garagiola didn't get along and grudgingly put up with each other for business. He later found out they would sneak out after the shows and eat in the back room of Stan Musial's Steakhouse.

Garagiola said Hawk's head looked like a soccer ball that his friends (he grew up with some of the best youth soccer players in the country) would kick around and would say after a Kiniski interview that "Canada's greatest athlete" sounded like he gargled with razor blades.

Once, Hawk and Kiniski lost their cool and started chasing Garagiola around the studio. Muchnick, backstage, was furious at his wrestlers, for being unprofessional around his personal friend who he had recruited into wrestling, and embarrassing the wrestling promotion and its reputation.

The wrestlers took it without saying a word. Later that night, Muchnick went to the local bowling alley for dinner and he heard Hawk and Kiniski being the centers of attention, yelling and laughing while bowling. Muchnick went to talk with them, and saw Garagiola with them, and they were all joking around. Garagiola admitted that they set the whole thing on the air up. But it wasn't what Muchnick wanted, as he wanted his announcers and referees to be left with full credibility at all times, and no announcer was ever allowed to be involved in a staged angle of that sort again.

Another time, Hawk and Garagiola went out for a drink with Muchnick, August Busch (the owner of one of the country's largest beer companies

as well as of the Cardinals), Longson, booker Bobby Bruns and Koplar. One of the wrestlers came back with a girl he was dating and after she left, Garagiola said, "Oh, God, she looks like her face was made up with Bon Ami." Bon Ami was the fluid you'd use to clean toilets in that era. Muchnick was furious at him for saying it, but Busch and Koplar thought it was the funniest thing they ever heard and were laughing like hell. Garagiola would tell the story years later when he was broadcasting baseball games.

"Harold was fighting for his life (with the station), and when they came up with the idea, it quickly got popular based on word-of-mouth," said Garagiola.

Very quickly, the first run show on Saturday night was the third highest rated locally produced program in the market, trailing the most popular evening newscast and St. Louis Cardinals baseball.

"We had a hit show on our hands," said Garagiola in a 1999 documentary on "Wrestling at the Chase."

Newspaper stories from the era would note that Sunday replays of the show from the night before would match the ratings of the live network National Football League games.

The show debuted on May 23, 1959, airing on Saturday nights from 9-10 p.m. They had three matches. The first main event saw Watson, Canada's biggest wrestling star, face Bob Orton, the grandfather of Randy Orton, in a two out of three fall match. Watson won the first fall when television time ran out. Garagiola opened the second show with the announcement that Watson had also won the second fall to take last week's main event.

The show would tape every other week, usually on Monday nights, sometimes on Wednesday nights, with them taping two shows, starting at 7 p.m.

"The Chase Hotel, when I was growing up, we used to drive by there and wish we won a contest where we'd have enough money to go to the Chase Hotel," said Garagiola.

Garagiola used to talk to Muchnick about syndicating the show, feeling it would draw big ratings everywhere. But as the President of the NWA, Muchnick didn't want to step on anyone's toes.

In 1960, Garagiola wrote the book "Baseball is a Funny Game," filled with humorous stories about the game and his career as a player and radio announcer. It became a national best seller. The success of the book led NBC to hire him as television baseball announcer.

In 1961, Garagiola began doing the Major League Baseball Game of the Week on NBC with Bob Wolff. He continued to do wrestling, since the games were only on weekends and the Chase tapings were during the week, but did miss some tapings if they coincided with his Cardinals broadcast job.

On December 29, 1962, Garagiola announced that due to his expanding roles with NBC, he was moving to New York, and this would be his last wrestling broadcast. Don Cunningham took over, although he passed away a year later and was replaced by George Abel. When that final show aired on Saturday night, the tape broke and they had to end the show early. The Hawk vs. Red Bastien main event didn't air until the replay showing the next Wednesday night.

"Joe had no bones about wrestling," Matysik said to *Slam! Wrestling*. "He said it was one of the most enjoyable, entertaining times he had. He recognized what it meant to the community."

"Sam was just a thorough professional, which is the highest accolade I can give," said Garagiola, who always praised Muchnick for giving him a key career break in television.

When he left, Muchnick gave him one tape, the March 17, 1962 episode of the show, headlined by a great technical match between O'Connor and Lorenzo Parente. In 1999, when KLPR did a special on the 40th anniversary of the first show, even though Garagiola had gone on to great fame, he never forgot or pretended that part of his life never existed. He remained lifelong friends with Kiniski. His younger brother, Mickey, became a fixture as the longtime ring announcer for the show.

He was not only happy to do an interview for the show, but in the discussion it came up that after 37 years, through numerous moves, he had always saved the tape of that one 90 minute episode. It remains the only tape that has survived from the Khorassan Room era.

The tape showed, as legend had it, men in suits and ties, women in evening gowns, sitting at fancy tables with tablecloths sipping champagne and with fine dining while they watched the matches. There were stories of the fans loving it when Dick the Bruiser would brawl outside the ring and jump on the various tables.

The show continued to be taped at the Khorassan Room until November 4, 1967, when the show changed from being taped in black and white and moved to color, and began taping at the KPLR TV Studios on Sunday mornings.

There were some shows taped at the Khorassan Room in 1972, the year Matysik became the lead announcer, and Ted Koplar, Harold's son, was the director of some of the shows. It then went permanently to the KPLR studios in the Chase Hotel complex. McMahon taped the one final episode at the Khorassan Room in 1983, but by that time they were drawing more of a typical modern wrestling audience.

In 2009, there was talk of doing a 50th anniversary show, a legends event as a one-time thing. The belief is that he would be an easy sellout.

Garagiola had already agreed if such a show would take place, that he would come in personally, and tie it in with some of his St. Louis charity work. Bob Costas had agreed to come in as the host, along with bringing back people like Jack Brisco, The Funk Brothers, Harley Race and others.

"Funny, the two who should have charged the most, Costas and Garagiola, would have done it for free," noted Matysik, who was behind the idea.

But times had changed greatly, as had the perception of wrestling in the market. The hotel, long since sold by the Koplar family, had no interest in having pro wrestling within its walls.

The move out of the Khorassan Room came because of a number of logistic issues. To save money, they ended up doing tapings usually after the big arena shows, which were on Friday nights. The problem was that talent would work Friday and then have to be brought back, and in the case of the top talent, flown back, for Monday nights. If they taped on Sunday afternoon, there were issues with some guys flying back for Saturday night dates and returning, but most guys just stayed in St. Louis and took Saturday night off or worked a show for the Kansas City circuit. There were also issues with the Khorassan Room being booked on Mondays and at times they had to tape on Wednesdays, which meant everyone had to leave and come back. So it just made economic sense to run studio tapes, where they'd tape three shows at once, starting at 12:30 p.m. Sundays.

In the 1999 award winning special, Matysik noted that "Wrestling at the Chase" never died, that the ratings were strong and the arenas were sold out. And that certainly was the case under Muchnick, who was doing his best business ever over his last few years as promoter. Muchnick was known for always protecting older legends, who had more longevity as main event draws in St. Louis than almost anywhere else, as Bruiser and Kiniski were still drawing big crowds when Flair was world champion.

Muchnick's last few years saw a mix of his headliners being the established stars of the 60s and 70s like Bruiser, O'Connor, Kiniski, Rocky Johnson, Von Raschke (who was never Baron Von Raschke in St. Louis because Muchnick when the subject would be brought up to him, would respond, "He's not really a Baron"), The Funks, Jack Brisco, Harley Race, Dick Murdoch and Rufus Jones mixed with a new crop of stars like Flair, King Kong Brody (who was never called Bruiser Brody out of deference with Dick the Bruiser), Ted DiBiase, Bruce Reed, Ken Patera, Sgt. Bob Slaughter and The Von Erich Brothers.

Flair during his early tenure was the greatest drawing world champion since Longson, who used to note that St. Louis was his best city, where the visibility of the wrestlers was the highest he'd seen anywhere, and would call it wrestling run the way it should be run. He'd reminisce about his level of celebrityhood in the city, noting that he'd spend a weekend there and make \$5,000 and spend \$10,000.

Muchnick retired after a show on January 1, 1982, Mayor Vincent Schoemehl declared it Sam Muchnick Day in St. Louis. They set the city's all-time record with 19,819 fans at The Arena, headlined by Flair beating Dusty Rhodes to retain the NWA title. The show sold out in advance, and could have easily drawn thousands more. Garagiola, one of the biggest names in television, was the M.C. at the party after the show, not because he was paid to be, but because it was something he wanted to be associated with.

The ratings remained strong through the year and into 1983 with Matysik as General Manager and booker. Shortly after a Flair vs. Brody match where Matysik felt Bob Geigel had cheated both on the payoff (even though it was the largest payoff of that era in St. Louis, with the record gate, both should have earned \$7,300 instead of just under \$6,000), Matysik quit the promotion to start an opposition group, ironically the same thing Muchnick did when he had his falling out with Packs. Everything changed immediately regarding the presentation.

Two weeks after he was off television, KPLR General Manager Hal Protter called Matysik noting the ratings had collapsed, that he needed to come back and that they simply couldn't communicate with Geigel and O'Connor. Matysik instead put an opposition wrestling show on a rival station. Less than six months later, with ratings getting worse, the station decided to end its tenure with the St. Louis Wrestling Club. They had meetings with McMahon, who heard about the station's problems with the local promotion and had already started on his plans to expand nationally, although that was still a secret at the time. They also had independent meetings with Matysik, who had started his own promotion built around Brody and Murdoch, which led to the station urging the two to work together, and both agreeing to do so at a subsequent meeting.

It's difficult to say how many episodes of the show were done. Do you consider the show ending when it was pulled from the NWA at the end of 1983? Or did it end when the name was dropped by WWF a few years later? Or did it end when KPLR finally canceled wrestling a few years after that? Also, in some years, Muchnick took a few months off from taping, during baseball season, to have something of an off-season. They would promote a final show of the season, and months later, a season opener, like a baseball franchise would do. He would get tapes from other promotions, Florida, Georgia, Texas, etc., which proved valuable because they would gauge fan mail and buzz in town on the wrestlers that appeared on the off-season shows. The ones people were talking about would be brought in during the new season.

Still, nearly 57 years after the debut of "Wrestling at the Chase" and 34 years since the end of the Muchnick era, St. Louis, after a weak post-Muchnick period in the late 80s when people still had an idea of what they wanted from wrestling based on what it was when they started watching, and felt the product from both Crockett and WWF couldn't match it, crowds and ratings plummeted, St. Louis rebounded to become a strong market once again.

Outside of Atlanta and one show in Houston, the largest crowd in WCW history was at the TWA Dome in St. Louis, drawing 29,000 fans and \$914,389, the second largest gate in the history of that company.

Even today, WWE runs PPVs more regularly at the Savvis Center than almost any arena in the world.

In 2000, the building, which is on the same grounds as the old Kiel Auditorium, the same site as some of the ashes of Thesz were spread after his death, hosted the NCAA tournament for the first time, and drew over six sessions 97,321 fans to see Cael Sanderson win the second of his four NCAA titles, destroying the all-time attendance record for that sport. Because of that, the Savvis Center and St. Louis has become the unofficial home for the tournament, hosting it six more times, including setting the attendance record of 109,450 in 2012, and breaking it with 113,013 in 2015.

Because of his sense of humor, known among the members of the team and to the public because of his testimony at a congressional hearing, and because he was a popular local star, Garagiola got a job doing the radio broadcasts of Cardinals games starting in 1955, the first season after his career as a player ended.

On a national basis, he was best known from 1967 to 1973 working with Hugh Downs, Barbara Walters and Frank McGee on "The Today Show." He became on a national basis what he was to St. Louis baseball and wrestling fans, the former athlete who would joke about how he wasn't that good, and was easy to like while he talked news, politics, but mostly sports. During that era, he testified for Major League Baseball in court when Curt Flood challenged the Reserve Clause, which he later called one of his biggest regrets.

His popularity from the show led him, in 1973, to a broadcasting lineup that included network shows, "Joe Garagiola's Memory Game," "Sale of the Century" and "The Baseball World of Joe Garagiola," which made it impossible to also continue his early morning work daily on "The Today Show."

He was also a regular guest host of "The Tonight Show" in that era when Johnny Carson would take a night off.

He had a second run on "The Today Show" from 1990 to 1992, working with Bryant Gumble and Katie Couric. After stepping down as host, he remained doing sports and human interest stories for the show for several more years. He was part of the announcing team for NBC's Game of the Week from 1961 to 1964, and again from 1974 to 1988. During that period, he was the announcer for the World Series and The All-Star game every other season, when NBC had the rights to the games. He returned to baseball announcing in 1990 with the California Angels, before coming out of retirement to work for the Arizona Diamondbacks from 1998 to 2012, where his son was the General Manager. He announced his retirement as a broadcaster after his 87th birthday.

Garagiola hosted the "Tonight Show" the only time Paul McCartney and John Lennon appeared together on the show, on May 14, 1968. It's one of the few tapes of the show from that era that exists, because one Beatles fan captured two minutes of the video on their 8mm home movie camera focused on their television set. Another Beatles fan put their old tape recorder next to the TV and never erased the cassette. The poor quality video and audio were later synchronized.

In his 1980 book "Backstage at the Tonight Show," Craig Tennes, who conducted the pre-interview with McCartney and Lennon before the show, wrote, "When they finally joined Joe, disaster struck. Joe started by saying one or two really silly questions and they went downhill from there. He just sat there saying like, 'Gee, I hope my kids see this,' and 'Boy, am I going to be popular in my neighborhood.' It was so insane that the Beatles became visibly uncomfortable and Joe had to actually let them leave. The Beatles believed they had been sloughed off by this guy and in a way I guess they had been."

Actually the segment, remembered as an embarrassment, started out in trouble, when Garagiola asked how they got to the studio from the hotel with all the fans that were crazy for them, and Lennon's response was, "A car." Lennon then said, "Well, how are you Johnny (for Carson)?" McCartney then said, "Where's Johnny."

It went downhill from there. Garagiola had already interviewed Talulah Bankhead, a famous actress from that era, who was clearly drunk and she started talking with The Beatles. After short answers to Garagiola's questions, McCartney went out of the blue to Garagiola and said, "So tell us a joke." Garagiola said, "I don't really have that many jokes, you tell me a joke." Lennon said, "We don't know any." Garagiola asked Lennon if he ever wanted to be a comedian, and his one word response was, "No."

Garagiola was all over television in the 60s and 70s not even related to baseball. He hosted numerous network television game shows, and was a panelist on network game shows. He would host the Orange Bowl parade every New Year's Eve from Miami, and was the host of the Westminster Dog show on the USA Network from 1994 to 2002. He did television ads with Gerald Ford for his 1976 presidential campaign and the two became close friends, with him being invited to the White House several times, including being with Ford the night of the 1976 election that Ford lost. Every year he visited major league teams in spring training to warn players against using chewing tobacco. He was known for his charity work, including helping found the Baseball Assistance Team.

Garagiola grew up in an Italian neighborhood in St. Louis called "The Hill." One of his best friends growing up lived across the street, Yogi Berra. It was a not well off neighborhood, Joe's father was an immigrant from Italy who worked at a brickyard and his mother knew no English. Joe and Yogi played baseball together from childhood. They both became catchers because as young children from poor families, their parents pooled the money for the two to share a glove. They purchased a catcher's mitt. They later worked together as waiters as teenagers at an Italian Restaurant. Garagiola was the better player of the two while growing up and playing in the different age group baseball leagues. By the time they were teenagers, the locals believed both of them were going to make it big.

"The Hill" is now called "Hall of Fame Place," because Garagiola, Berra, and four soccer Hall of Famers grew up there within a year or two of each other. Frank Borghi, the goalkeeper for the 1950 U.S. soccer team that won the World Cup, making several remarkable saves in a 1-0 win over England in the finals in one of that sport's biggest upsets in history, was also a baseball star as a teenager who played with the two while growing up.

When Garagiola and Berra were 16, they, along with a star from another part of the area, 19-year-old Albert "Red" Schoendienst, were brought to Forest Park in Cardinal General Manager Branch Rickey's Lincoln Continental, for a tryout. Garagiola was immediately signed. They passed on Berra and Schoendienst. But the Cardinals chief scout went to bat for Schoendienst, who then got a small dollar contract.

Berra was signed the next year by the New York Yankees and went on to become a sports icon in his own right, one of the greatest catchers in Major League history, and a colorful figure known for his nonsensical quotes. One of the most enduring American cartoon characters, Yogi Bear, was named after him, even if the creators of the character in 1958, William Hanna and Joseph Barbera, claimed in court the similarity was pure coincidence.

Garagiola would frequently tell jokes about quotes Berra would say, even as late as a few years ago when, as both men were living in retirement communities, he called up Berra and asked how's it going, and he claimed Berra said, "It's all right, but geez, they've got a of old people here."

Garagiola's two favorite subjects for comedy would be making fun of how bad he was as a major league player, greatly exaggerated, and jokes about his childhood friend and what later became known as "Yogi-isms," comedic quotes attributed to Berra, which he may or may not have actually said.

"One time a woman came up to him and said, 'Yogi, you look cool in that outfit.' Yogi smiled and said, 'Thanks, you don't look so hot yourself.'"

"I'd ask him (Yogi), 'What time is it,?' Yogi'll say, 'Now.'"

In the 1960 World Series, former president Herbert Hoover and Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru were introduced before the game, as was Berra, as the Yankees starting catcher. Garagiola told Berra it was amazing, that he got more of a fan reaction than anyone that day.

"Yogi, you've become such a world figure that you draw more applause than either a prime minister or a former president, how can you explain it?" He claimed Berra said back, "Certainly, I'm a better hitter."

"Each year I don't play I get better." Garagiola said about his own career. "The first year on the banquet trail, I was a former ballplayer. The second year I was a baseball great. The third year I was one of baseball's biggest stars. Just last year I was introduced as one of baseball's immortals. The older I get, the more I realize that the worst break I had was playing."

Schoendienst also ended up as a baseball Hall of Famer and is considered one of the greatest players in the history of the Cardinals. He made ten All-Star teams as one of the best second basemen of that era. He later had a long run as the manager of the Cardinals.

Now 93, Schoendienst and Garagiola were the last living members of the 1946 Cardinal team that won the World Series.

Garagiola was only 17 when he reached AAA ball and hit .293 for the Columbus Clippers, the youngest player in the history of that franchise. He would have made the major league roster the next year, except he was called to serve in World War II in 1944. He was discharged in 1946, and immediately brought to the major league roster.

As a 20-year-old rookie catcher, he was remembered for going four-for-five and drive in three runs to lead the Cardinals to the game four win in the series where they beat the Ted Williams-led Boston Red Sox in seven games. His four RBI's in that series is the second most in major league history (behind Andruw Jones of the Atlanta Braves in 1996) for someone under the age of 21.

In actuality, many believe it was a separated shoulder suffered the next year that led to him not achieving the heights expected in baseball. He was hitting .347 when he was injured, but when he came back, his swing was never the same, and it hampered his throwing arm. But you'd never know that talking with him because it wouldn't fit his self-proclaimed narrative that he wasn't a very good baseball player.

But unlike the other two in Rickey's Lincoln that afternoon, the one of the three thought to be a can't miss prospect in baseball, didn't last long. He was a career .257 hitter, who was out of baseball at the age of 28.

In 1952, he was traded to the Pittsburgh Pirates, the worst team in the league, which had a horrendous 42-112 record.

"We lost eight of our first nine games, and then we went into a slump."

"Once we had a rain out and we staged a victory party."

"You can't imagine the thrill every day it was to walk into a clubhouse and wonder if your uniform is still there."

It was in his final season, with the Chicago Cubs, that he was brought before a U.S. Senate Committee as Senator Edwin Johnson of Colorado sponsored a bill that would make corporate ownership of baseball teams illegal, targeting the Cardinals, owned by the Anheuser-Busch brewery. Johnson accused the Cardinals of tampering with him to get him from the Cubs.

Garagiola responded, "Senator, how can you tamper with a .250 hitter?"

His testimony in making people laugh led to the Cardinals hiring him as an announcer a year later.

One of Garagiola's famous lines was that, "Not only was I not the best catcher in the major leagues, but I wasn't even the best catcher on my street."

"It's not a record, but being traded four times (he was actually traded three times) when there are only eight teams in the league tells you something. I thought I was modeling uniforms for the National League."

Matysik felt that on a local basis, Garagiola, would be considered one of the four most famous players ever on the Cardinals with Stan Musial, Bob Gibson and Lou Brock, and that locally among older fans, Musial and Garagiola would be neck-and-neck. While the other three, as well as Albert Pujols, would be definitely better known among sports fans, Matysik felt that on a national basis, due to his entertainment work, Garagiola and Musial, who were best friends in real life and the godfather to the others' children, would be the most famous Cardinal players in history.

Garagiola's lifetime honors were wide and varied, a Peabody Award winner for broadcasting for his television show "The Baseball World of Joe Garagiola," the Missouri Sports Hall of Fame, the Ford Frick award for broadcasting broadcasters wing of the baseball Hall of Fame, the Sportswriters and Sportscasters Hall of Fame, the St. Louis Wrestling Hall of Fame, The Sportscasters Humanitarian Award in 1995, the Buck O'Neil Lifetime Achievement award from the Baseball Hall of Fame (one of only three people so honored), and numerous awards for charity work.

APRIL 25, 2016

There was an interesting historical find from Matt Farmer on Twitter, which was a letter from Sam Muchnick to Fred Kohler on March 12, 1953 regarding the NWA world heavyweight championship. At the time, Kohler was the Chairman of the Championship Committee. Muchnick had just polled 20 leading promoters asking for their thoughts on, should there be an accident or serious injury to Lou Thesz, who had been champion for the previous several years, who the promoters felt should replace him. In the letter, he noted that Verne Gagne gotten first place votes, Killer Kowalski got three and Argentina Rocca got two. In tallying points since Muchnick asked the promoters to pick their top five in order, Gagne was first with Kowalski a closer second and Rocca a distant third. This would have been before Muchnick and Kohler had their falling out when Muchnick booked Thesz to defend his title with another promoter in the Chicago area who Kohler considered his opposition. In September of that year, Kohler's response was to no longer use Thesz or the NWA champion, and make Gagne, as U.S. television champion, into his main title. Since Kohler had national TV on the old Dumont Network, he would book Gagne as U.S. champion to various promoters for the same percentage that Thesz would get as world champion. Because of television, in some places Gagne did better as a draw than Thesz until Kohler lost his national TV. But it was due to that period where the feeling was that Gagne and Kohler had undercut the NWA champion, that Gagne never got any NWA title matches nor was he considered to replace Thesz in 1957 when Thesz asked out even though many believe he'd have been the best choice. Ultimately that led to the formation of the AWA, as when Gagne bought controlling interest in the Minneapolis Boxing and Wrestling Club, he created the AWA and made himself the world champion.

A lot of old Muchnick correspondence from the 50s has come out of late in historical research. From his writing, you could see just how badly off the NWA was in the late 50s and early 60s. It was strong when Lou Thesz was champion, but really started falling apart with Dick Hutton and Pat O'Connor as champion. The title drew big when Buddy Rogers won it in 1961, but that period was a problem because Vince McMahon controlled Rogers and so many promoters couldn't get dates on him that they started creating their own world champions. So the alliance nearly fell apart and it was really the bringing back of

Thesz in 1963 and the period through 1983 when it was strong again, although the foundation started to crumble some would argue in the mid-70s when Muchnick no longer had influence over the champion's bookings and they went to all the screw job finishes. Once WWF expanded, the end of the old version of the alliance was inevitable.

JANUARY 8, 2018

Larry Matysik, 71, best known for writing a number of books on pro wrestling and as one of the top wrestling announcers of the territorial era, was hospitalized this past week.

Herb Simmons, the promoter of Southern Illinois Championship Wrestling, who has kept Matysik active in wrestling as an announcer and booker while his physical condition has deteriorated due to horrible problems with his spine, posted on 1/1, "Not the way I wanted to start off 2018. Please keep our friend Larry Matysik in your prayers. He has been admitted to the hospital this evening. I will keep everyone updated to his condition."

The next day he said that Matysik was able to respond to his verbal commands and was experiencing episodes of pain and they were doing tests on him. They were waiting to hear from doctors and a course of action.

At press time, his wife said that he was hospitalized and in a lot of pain but they hadn't diagnosed the cause of the pain.

Matysik was a childhood fan of wrestling in the 50s, whose father was a fan and actually attended the famous 1928 Joe Stecher vs. Strangler Lewis match in St. Louis live.

In the early 60s, he started writing for wrestling magazines and did an interview with Sam Muchnick. Muchnick took Matysik under his wing and would first pay him \$25 to call in all the area newspapers with results of the shows and later hired him full-time and groomed him as his personal protégé and taught the business to him. Matysik, like people like Mike Graham, Greg Gagne, Joel Watts and others were brought up with the idea they would eventually be running their territories until cable television and Vince McMahon changed wrestling.

Matysik was only 24 when KPLR-TV and Muchnick hired him to be the host of "Wrestling at the Chase" in 1970. During the 70s, Matysik, Gordon Solie and Lance Russell were considered the premier wrestling announcers.

St. Louis was a unique city, as it was not part of a territory, and its television wrestling show was one of the highest rated in the country, and the live shows at Kiel Auditorium and the Checkerdome (or the Arena, as it was sometimes called), were considered, along with Madison Square Garden, the most prestigious place to appear in the U.S.

It was very tame, presented sports-like as Muchnick hated things that he felt would bring disrepute to wrestling. Things like making referees look bad were not tolerated. Wins and losses were of the utmost importance and constantly referred to in the building of championship matches. The world title was always the main event and ultimate prize. Muchnick, in the 50s, spearheaded the NWA and was arguably the most important figure in pro wrestling until he left as NWA President and booker of the world champion in 1975. In the 50s, the original idea of the NWA was to be a regulatory body that would establish world champions that would defend all over the world. The NWA champion was chosen by a vote of the Board of Directors, with Muchnick booking him all over the world. Leroy McGuirk was put in charge of the junior heavyweight title and Salvador Lutteroth was put in charge of the light heavyweight title. While other NWA titles at lightweight and welterweight existed in Mexico, and there was a number of NWA world tag team titles and U.S. titles and such, the alliance itself didn't recognize them as true touring world championships.

St. Louis featured limited angles and fewer interviews than other shows, focusing on wrestling and featuring more competitive matches. By the late 70s, Muchnick appointed Matysik to be the co-booker with Pat O'Connor, and the last several years of the Muchnick run ended up being his most successful, built around Ric Flair, Harley Race, Ted DiBiase, Kevin, Kerry & David Von Erich, Dick the Bruiser, Gene Kiniski and Bruiser Brody.

It was Matysik who made the call to bring in Flair as a top star, while O'Connor felt he was too small to headline St. Louis. Matysik showed Muchnick tapes of him and Muchnick immediately saw money in him. The exposure in St. Louis and reputation garnered by main eventing and drawing well there greatly helped Flair's standing to become world champion, since St. Louis was the flagship market of the NWA.

After Muchnick retired on January 1, 1982, on what the Mayor and City Council named Sam Muchnick Day in the city, Matysik took over the office as General Manager. But St. Louis had a way of doing things and a way of paying, and Geigel, who was in charge, had other ways of doing things. They butted heads as Matysik felt they were making decisions that were hurting the city and the reputation of wrestling in the city.

He left once, but came back, but the problems continued. It was little things, like Muchnick's rule was when a bill came in the morning mail, it was always mailed back with a check by Noon, while Geigel was more into putting off payment. He also at times drained the company bank account of profits.

The final straw was the 1983 Flair vs. Bruiser Brody NWA title match, the 60:00 draw that was on the DVD he later released that was taped by NTV in Japan. That match set the all-time record gate for the city, and by the usual percentages, Flair and Brody should have both been paid more than \$7,200. Geigel overruled Matysik's payoffs and paid them just under \$6,000, which was a giant payoff in those days but not the fair percentage, taking the money off the top as greater profits for the owners.

Matysik quit, and briefly ran opposition in St. Louis. At the end of 1983, KPLR-TV, which aired "Wrestling at the Chase," was unhappy with Geigel's product as when Matysik left, Geigel had no idea how to promote the city, running it like Kansas City and popularity and ratings collapsed. Both Vince McMahon, looking to go national, and Matysik, were negotiating for the time slot, one the key slots in the country. Ted Kopplar suggested that they work together, with the idea he loved McMahon's ambition and the fact McMahon had a strong stable of talent that was doing good business throughout the Northeast, but Matysik knew the market and the local media.

In a meeting, McMahon and Matysik agreed to be partners, but after the meeting, Jim Barnett, the Director of Operations for Titan Sports, the parent company of WWF, called Matysik and said the deal was changed, that he would be put under a salary, but would have no points in the St. Louis operation.

McMahon had also offered KPLR-TV \$2,100 per week plus a percentage of the live shows to make the deal to get the time slot. Matysik worked for McMahon through 1993, when he was let go.

Matysik also was nearly the first booker for World Championship Wrestling. Jim Herd knew Matysik as he was the Director for Wrestling at the Chase as well as a program director in St. Louis, and he was brought in to head WCW after the 1988 purchase of Jim Crockett Promotions. Matysik was first offered the booking job, but Barnett, at this point working for Crockett and then Turner (Barnett had been fired by McMahon and Crockett hired him), pretty much talked Herd out of the decision.

Matysik was responsible for the main event and the finish of the match at Starrcade '88 in Norfolk.

Dusty Rhodes was the booker, and at this point, Rhodes and Flair had been butting heads and Rhodes wanted Flair gone. Rhodes' idea for

Starrcade was to put Flair in a match with Rick Steiner, in a cage, and given Steiner was a legitimate shooter (he was starting heavyweight at the University of Michigan a few years earlier) and tough guy, he was to beat Flair clean in six minutes, figuring Flair would quit over it.

The problem was that Turner hadn't signed the purchase of WCW, and to Turner, having Flair was a key part of the purchase. Herd called Matysik and explained his problem. He was savvy enough to see what Rhodes was up to and feared Flair quitting, knowing the entire Turner deal could fall apart if that happened.

Matysik told him that Starrcade needed to be Flair vs. Lex Luger, which was the company's biggest drawing match at the time, and that Rhodes had abused Flair so much in booking that fans saw Hulk Hogan as the real champion, and not Flair. He felt they needed to rebuild the title, and felt Flair, generally considered the best in-ring wrestler in the country at the time, and the best promo of anyone who could have been champion, had to be rebuilt.

While most NWA promoters would use the champion to get over their local talent, Muchnick believed in a strong champion. While there could be draws and DQ finishes, at the end of every major program, the final result would be the champion going over clean. Flair had never beaten Luger clean, so Matysik booked the idea of a 30 minute match with Flair winning. It should be noted Flair himself ended up doing a heel move holding the trunks to win, because Flair always felt protecting Luger and Sting was important in building the company's future.

The decision saved Flair, who stayed with the company until a falling out with Herd in the summer of 1991. It's questionable if the WCW era would have happened if Herd hadn't replaced Rhodes and overruled him there, and even if Turner had bought the company, their famous 1989 year, built around Flair's matches with Ricky Steamboat and Terry Funk never would have happened.

There was also the issue that Matysik didn't want to leave St. Louis and move his family to Atlanta. Herd did give him a low-ball offer to be part of management, but not as booker. He felt insulted by the offer and stayed with WWF.

He remained an avid fan and of all the people I knew in wrestling, when it came to watching angles in WWF, well into the last few years, I would say that nobody had a better track record of predicting successes, failures and in betweens that I dealt with.

In 2014, when he was inducted into the Thesz/Tragos Hall of Fame and given the Jim Melby award, he thanked me and this newsletter (which he always called "the bulletin") in his speech for keeping his interest in pro wrestling alive the past few decades, which led to him writing books and distributing St. Louis DVDs and such, which led to him coming back to book and announce on the small-time scale because he just loved doing it.

His physical problems have been terrible due to the collapse of his spine years ago and got progressively worse. Few know it, but the reason that myself, Wade Keller and Scott Williams in recent years were added to the Thesz/Tragos Hall of Fame there is because Matysik pushed it to people like Gerald Brisco and Kyle Klingman, who were at first skeptical, but later embraced it.

When he got word that I was going to be inducted (which, due to a schedule conflict, ended up taking place in 2016 instead of 2015), before they asked, he told me they were going to, and urged me to go. For one, due to his declining physical condition, he couldn't go for his own induction, and also said, and this is probably the proudest thing anyone has ever said to me that it would mean so much to him as to the value of the Jim Melby Award if he was on the same list historically with me. I can say without reservation that nobody in my early years and you can count the names on one hand overall, had as much to do with my learning the nature of the wrestling business, both the good and bad. While most people say that my mentor in reporting was Frank Deford, the reality is I didn't even know Deford until 1989. Deford was the one who gave me a national platform. But it was Matysik, more

than anyone, who gave me the background insider knowledge, just as Muchnick gave him, to navigate the industry at a young age and teaching about the cons and swerves and manipulations and seeing through them.

Matysik had written a number of books for ECW Press including "Wrestling at the Chase," one of the most popular books for inside fans, "Drawing Heat the Hard Way," about the business of pro wrestling, "a book where he did the impossible task of rating the top 100 pro wrestlers of all-time and did bios of all of them, and was most recently working on a book comparing and contrasting Sam Muchnick and Vince McMahon, since he was the only person who worked for both of them.

APRIL 25, 2018

BRUNO VS. HARLEY: OVERCOMING WRESTLING POLITICS TO CREATE HISTORY

Editor's Note: Larry Matysik, host of Wrestling At The Chase, the right-hand man of legendary St. Louis promoter Sam Muchnick, and frequent Wrestling Observer Radio guest, submitted this story to us about the machinations behind the 1973 NWA title match between Harley Race and Bruno Sammartino.

As smart, stiff, and stubborn as the competition was during the struggle for the NWA throne between titleholder Harley Race and challenger Bruno Sammartino on June 15, 1973, the politics that made the showdown possible were just as stressful. Not a shoot (they didn't happen anymore) and thanks to the pressure packed disagreements, Race and Sammartino believed each had something to prove when the bell clanged.

The calculating maneuvers deeply involved the Funk family, particularly Dory Sr. and Dory Jr., along with NWA president Sam Muchnick, Tampa promoter Eddie Graham, Jack Brisco, WWWF boss, New York promoter and Sammartino booker Vince McMahon Sr., and several discontented NWA promoters who agreed with the views of Dory Sr.

There were two lines of politics at play: one was in the National Wrestling Alliance involving the Funks, Brisco, and Graham plus a couple other big players. The other was not between Sam and Vince Sr. – they seemed content with their relation at the time – but rather sending Muchnick and McMahon against a crew of particular promoters apparently on the opposite side of Muchnick.

And where were Dory Sr. and Sam? For years, those two had been allies. Now, nobody was sure anymore and the game changed nearly every day. It's easy to see why consternation inside the wrestling business was boiling. No wonder Sammartino and Race felt the pressure to perform at the highest level in their historic contest. At their prime, they were two proud and talented competitors. The tension was not lessened one iota even though the quarrel had apparently been solved.

Like all wrestling disputes, however, finally settling the political arguments was never easy to do, especially this one. It wasn't a shot, but darned if it didn't mean something to everyone involved.

The entire matter began when Dory Jr. captured the World Championship as recognized by the National Wrestling Alliance on Feb. 11, 1969, in Tampa. Major decisions like this were made by the NWA Board of Directors, a tidy group of seven. Within, there was some scuffling about the choice of Funk to replace Gene Kiniski. For one, Cowboy Bill Watts wanted the role. Adding to the debate was the fact that both Dory Jr. and Watts had been busy in St. Louis working for

Sam Muchnick, the NWA president and the most influential member of the board. Another clever manipulator on the board was Dory Jr.'s rugged father, Dory Sr., who had become a close friend of none other than Sam.

In the end, Watts got only one vote from Tulsa promoter Leroy McGuirk, Watts' business partner. With the pushes of Sr. and Muchnick, Jr. received the remaining tallies and was picked as the youngest champion aside from Lou Thesz in 1937. Dory Jr. turned out to be a highly successful kingpin, working wherever Muchnick booked him, big markets or small. He learned the tricks of a champion, to make a challenger look capable of winning. A fine football player in college with a deep knowledge of wrestling thanks to his dad, he could take care of himself and even be sort of a heel when it was worth it.

Most of all, he consistently drew big crowds, earning good money for promoters and wrestlers alike. I always felt that part of his appeal was that Dory was so young that many fans attended figuring a more experienced, most nasty foe would make an exciting title change likely. That didn't happen, though, and admiration for Funk grew. Dory dressed the part and conducted himself like a professional champion and his rivalry with Jack Brisco, another young superstar, became known worldwide. Every fan knew about Dory's spinning toehold.

But the reigns of all champions eventually come to an end. After a little more than four years, Dory had turned back most of the leading contenders in the NWA. Likewise, some of the attendance figures had slipped somewhat. They were not bad, but were not as outstanding as earlier. When the Board of Directors decided those reasons meant it was time for a new champion, Sr. balked. Some promoters needed to develop new challengers, he said. Muchnick's booking of Jr. was unimaginative and repetitive, Sr. claimed, especially the finishes Sam would allow.

Nonetheless, Jack Brisco was selected to take Jr.'s position as World Champion in Houston on March 2, 1973. Eddie Graham was a strong advocate of Brisco getting the crown, which led to the end of Graham's friendship with Dory Sr. When Jr. was bidding for the title, Graham pushed for him. Muchnick respectfully agreed it was time for a change, voting for Brisco and that swayed some others.

Here's where it gets thorny.

Some promoters then and historians now feel that Sr., and perhaps Jr. as well, rejected the plan of Jr. losing to another babyface like Brisco. That rather old school theory said that a babyface should lose to a heel and a heel should lose to a babyface. There are those followers of Brisco who thought that the Funks didn't want Jr. to be beaten by a past NCAA wrestling champion like Brisco because it would detract from Jr.'s noted scientific skills. (Jack himself may have felt that way.)

And a small, but determined, part of the disagreement was that maybe time had passed Muchnick by and it was best for him to go and Funk to stay with a new president. There definitely were angry arguments within the NWA depending on the different viewpoints.

How do I know all this? Well, I was working as a publicity man in Sam's office and had earned his respect. Sometimes, I was invited into his room to listen to his telephone discussion about the hullabaloo. Sometimes, he just wanted to talk about the situation, and he talked with me. On some occasions, Wild Bill Longson, Sam's minority partner in the St. Louis Wrestling Club, told me how frustrated Muchnick was and why. Remember, Muchnick and Longson both had lengthy and knowledgeable histories in the politics of wrestling. Both of them, and Sam in particular, had heard, seen, and probably done it all.

In this case, what brought everything to a head was the truck wreck Jr. had on Poppa Funk's ranch on February 28. The timing was such, only two days before the match with Brisco was scheduled, that many skeptical wrestling insiders questioned if there really had been an accident and Jr. really had been injured. Paul Boesch, the Houston

promoter, was especially unhappy and disbelieving since he had to refund tickets for what he had plugged as a major show.

Muchnick set a record for being neutral as he tried to balance all the emotional reactions. He requested and received written description of what had happened in the accident and how long the injuries would sideline Jr. Sam distributed that news to all the NWA membership, dubious or not as he worried about keeping the NWA together.

He also worried about St. Louis, his own town. With Dory and the champion out of the picture, the bouts Sam and booker Pat O'Connor had planned were down the drain. As usual, meticulous planning had it set up for Brisco vs. Dory's brother Terry, Brisco vs. Gene Kiniski or Harley Race, and Brisco in a rematch vs. Dory Junior. The last thing Muchnick needed was an NWA collapse and the departure of some key performers.

This, however, was a big-time political game.

In this case, it gave Muchnick a reason to call Vince McMahon, Sr. At that time, Vince Sr. was running the World Wide Wrestling Federation, which in essence was the public name of his promotion for Northeast towns he owned like New York, Boston, Baltimore, and Philadelphia. Vince was also an NWA member.

In a dispute about the title in 1963, McMahon had departed the NWA and, with a win over Buddy Rogers on May 17, 1963, named Bruno Sammartino the champion of the "new" WWWF. McMahon returned to the NWA when his organization was challenged by a lucrative independent promotion. That was no big deal, because McMahon and Muchnick had remained good friends, despite any business differences.

Meanwhile, Sammartino had developed an amazing reputation over eight years as Vince's champion. He also had good rapport with Muchnick, who found Bruno a gentleman and a businessman. The politics clicking in Sam's head as the Funk-NWA controversy evolved led to him booking Sammartino for St. Louis. McMahon told Sam that Bruno would regain the WWWF honor in later in 1973.

Sam put two-and-two together. When Jr. sent word he could get back in action, the Funks had agreed for Jr. to drop the NWA prize to Race in Kansas City on May 24. This would be before bad guy Race had agreed to lose that belt to Brisco in Houston on July 20. KC was an NWA stronghold, plus it owned minority interest in St. Louis. Surely, it could be trusted to keep its word and make Funk lose to Race.

But if any hint of a double-cross got in the wind, Muchnick wanted it known that thanks to his relationships with Vince and Bruno, Sam might pull St. Louis out of the NWA and join the WWWF. Now that was hardball politics.

To play it safe, Sam booked Race against Sammartino in St. Louis on June 15 which allowed him to go either way with the finish. While Muchnick expected smart local fans to know all about the mighty Sammartino, he made sure by giving him a series of triumphs over Ivan Koloff, The Invader (unmasked as Dick Murdoch), Rip Hawk, Dan Miller, and George Steele. It would still be a remarkable match either way.

When Race and Sammartino squared off that night, they both knew what the deal was. The mat world would remain basically the same. By autumn, Brisco would dethrone Race and Sammartino would upend Stan Stasiak for their respective championships. Sadly, Sr. passed away on June 3rd. Muchnick clearly was in charge of the NWA, and actually thought very highly of Dory Jr.

Thus, the only question remaining was how Sammartino and Race would conduct their one-hour draw. Neither side wanted to devise a finish that would restart the problems there had been. Now, all the politics and psychology were dropped in the competitors' laps: two out of three falls, one hour time limit. Pat O'Connor, who had told me this

tale before he departed for New Zealand in 1982, had said, "Do the right thing. You're both smart enough."

It was just the correct basic advice he'd passed on to Sammartino and Race in 1973 and said it would be true for me even a decade later if I was working with the correct combatants. *Listen to the crowd. They'll lead you, tell you what to do.* For what ever difficulties O'Connor sometimes had, he was right on the money with that advice.

To the match itself for those who have never seen it, here was my own notes:

"Slow start, felt out each other. Big crowd settling in. A couple tests of strength with wristlocks, and handlock tests, after pretty even duels won by Bruno. Race got in control with chin locks, pulling tights, and mainly choking. Just when Harley opened up with punches and headbutts, Bruno fought back with forearm smashes and reversed a whip into the corner. Race tried his suplex, but Sammartino blocked it getting a two-count after his own body slam. More tests of strength with Race getting nailed by body slams. Reverse neck breaker by Race. Two flying tackles by Race, but Bruno stood his ground and flattened Harley. But then Race got Bruno in a front rolling cradle. Bruno kicked out at two. Race punched after delivering a headbutt to jaw. Bruno fought back, but missed a shot. Race went behind and hit one, then two atomic knee drops, lifted and then twice jammed Bruno's tailbone into his knee. Race got the pin for the first fall in 17:12. Now the fans were into it."

The battle sped up quite a bit, plus another element was added in the second fall. It was extremely hot in the building, nudging just over 100 degrees. (Even though Kiel Auditorium was air conditioned, the equipment was not working well.) Another problem was that smoking was still allowed, so the interior was not only boiling hot, but permeated with smoke. Clearly, Sammartino and Race were more comfortable working with each other, each taking impressive bumps from slams and arm whips, but the pair was visibly soaked in sweat.

As the fall neared an end, Race and Sammartino both looked as though they were standing in a hot shower, sweat pouring down their faces. Race seemed to have the edge, especially dropping diving headbutts from mat level into Sammartino's muscular chest and neck. Then, Race banged his knee into Sammartino's forehead. Sensing a final opening, Race went up on the top rope to unleash his most potent diving headbutt. But, that backfired when Sammartino plucked Race off the top, hoisted him high into the air and scored with a spine rattling body slam, followed by two more awesome body slams.

Sammartino bounced Race off the ropes and trapped Race in his famous bearhug. Squeeze, squeeze, squeeze, and finally Race realized escape was impossible thanks to Sammartino's raw power. Rather than risk injury, Race submitted the second fall in 11:53.

When the bell sounded for the final fall, more than 20 minutes remained in the 60 minute time limit. Thus, few spectators in the capacity house expected a draw with that much time left and the majority was yelling for Sammartino, but still, plenty were for Race and his NWA connection. Yet, it seemed both Sammartino and Race cranked up their offenses to demonstrate why they were ranked as the best. The heat and smoke ramped up, too, leading to some of the sharpest wrestling gossip in years.

Both combatants were sweating constantly. Later, after the contest was finished, Race noted he didn't train hard and smoked regularly. To the contrary, he pointed out, Sammartino did not smoke, was a heavy weightlifter, and took care of his cardio with regular running. Nonetheless, said Race, Sammartino was pouring sweat and puffing when the two locked up. Race also claimed that Sammartino was so dehydrated that he licked the sweat off Race's neck, chest, and arms to get some water.

These two had a lot to prove to each other and to fans as athletes and performers. They knew what they were doing, but pride was on the line. Naturally, Sammartino responded by saying that it was Race who was so dehydrated that he greedily tried to get moisture by licking the sweat off Sammartino's body. Nobody will ever know the truth, and it might be partially in the favor of both. This much, however, is fact: neither man held back one bit despite terrible conditions and each proved himself truly unique in the wrestling world.

That final fall was loaded with everything from some wrestling holds and moves, rough-and-tumble back and forth, Race scoring with his suplex and Sammartino unable to keep Race trapped in again in the bearhug. Race failed to pin Sammartino after a diving headbutt from the top turnbuckle. Sammartino tried the hanging backbreaker, but Race kicked off the rope to land a back bodydrop. Sammartino's strength had him up before the two count. Those twenty-plus minutes passed like lightning.

I was the ring announcer and called, "One minute left". Race hooked Sammartino's head to try another suplex, but Sammartino broke free. Race hit the ropes, charging forward with a flying tackle, but Sammartino ensnared him with another bearhug. Only seconds remained before the one hour time limit expired and Race was not conceding. Even without the orders of a booker, Race and Sammartino had managed to subdue their substantial egos and engineer an exciting one hour draw. The two superstars finished as the politics wanted them to: completely even, a draw.

Race had the championship for just 57 days in between Funk and Brisco. Nonetheless, he earned plenty of favors for how he conducted himself and even for what he did as a former ruler after Brisco assumed the throne. Race and Bob Geigel controlled the KC vote, and didn't stir up any trouble. Race dropped the crown to Brisco on July 20, 1973, in Houston.

Their vote was for Terry Funk to be champion, which Jr. wanted, when it was time for Brisco to move on Dec. 10, 1975. When Muchnick retired, feeling the NWA was in shaky condition, Geigel was satisfied to be the front man as NWA president. That put Jim Barnett as the powerhouse booking the champion and handling the funds. Race had favors returned when he knocked off Terry Funk on Feb. 6, 1977 in Toronto.

As for Sammartino, he dethroned Stan Stasiak on Dec. 10, 1973. The trails leading from both sides all lead to Hulk Hogan and eventually, the WWF/E. It can all be traced back to what happened when politics created the Sammartino-Race struggle, long after Buddy Rogers ran into Bruno Sammartino.

Truly, Bruno vs. Harley was a duel to remember for a number of reasons.

LARRY MATYSIK ENTERS HOSPICE CARE

NOVEMBER 24, 2018

Larry Matysik, 72, who promoted, booked, and announced wrestling and wrote a number of books including "Wrestling at the Chase," is now in hospice care.

Herb Simmons, his close friend, said that Matysik is suffering from pneumonia and his condition is deteriorating quickly.

Matysik was the right-hand man for Sam Muchnick, the longtime president of the National Wrestling Alliance, and the St. Louis Wrestling Club during the 70s and early 80s when St. Louis was considered by many as the key city for pro wrestling in North America. Matysik started out writing for wrestling magazines in the 60s and eventually landed a job with Muchnick, and became the television

announcer for "Wrestling at the Chase," which routinely drew an average of 200,000 viewers per week on KPLR-TV, Ch. 11, making it among the highest rated pro wrestling shows in the country. He also on occasion would fill in and do the AWA television show.

Matysik was considered in the 70s along with Lance Russell and Gordon Solie as one of the top three pro wrestling announcers in the country. But he also worked behind-the-scenes at all facets of the business. He was co-booker with Pat O'Connor and was responsible for a major upswing in the business in the late 70s with the introduction of people like Ric Flair, Bruiser Brody, Ted DiBiase, and the Von Erich Brothers, to go along with longtime area legends like Harley Race and Dick the Bruiser.

The climax of the Muchnick era was the final show on January 1, 1982, at the Arena, which drew 19,819 fans and sold out well in advance. Matysik put together a show that brought out major political leaders as well as Muchnick's first lead announcer, Joe Garagiola, who had become a major name on NBC television with baseball, game shows, and as a regular sub for Johnny Carson on The Tonight Show.

St. Louis deteriorated quickly with Muchnick gone, as Matysik had major issues with how the new head of the business, Bob Geigel, would do things. He quit once, but Muchnick put them back together. In 1983, Matysik put together a storyline to lead to a Flair vs. Brody match, a two-of-three falls match that went to a 60-minute draw and set the city's all-time gate record. But when Geigel shorted both Flair and Brody on what had been the usual St. Louis percentage for a world title match, although still giving them what would have been the largest payoff at the time anyone would get in the U.S. at the time, he quit once again.

Matysik was close friends with Brody and they started up an opposition promotion and did well at the box office, but there were issues behind the scenes that led to problems with the financiers. Later in 1983, when KPLR made the decision to get rid of Geigel's group due to declining ratings and the weak quality of the television, both Matysik and Vince McMahon pitched for the Chase time slot. A meeting was held where the owner of the station, Ted Kopplar, suggested both work together as partners, which was agreed to, but quickly Jim Barnett told Matysik that they could not be partners after all, and Matysik worked for McMahon through 1991 before he was let go.

Matysik was also talked with in 1988 by Jim Herd to come in and work for WCW shortly before the Turner Broadcasting purchase came through. Herd, who had worked for KPLR, produced Wrestling at the Chase and thus was friends with Muchnick and Matysik. But that fell through as Barnett talked Herd out of that decision and Matysik also refused to move from St. Louis to Atlanta, where WCW was to be based.

Matysik remained associated with local wrestling, and until recently, would announce and book matches with partner Simmons and their Southern Illinois Championship Wrestling promotion.

Matysik wrote a series of books including "Drawing Heat the Hard Way" about the realities of pro wrestling, "The Greatest Wrestlers of All-Time," "Wrestling at the Chase," and "Brody," with Barbara Goodish about the life of Bruiser Brody. He also published a 1959-83 record book of St. Louis matches which included comments on booking which is one of the greatest guides to understanding that style of wrestling booking and politics and how Muchnick ran area wrestling.

He was working on a book that would compare and contrast the wrestling and working for McMahon and Muchnick before his health deteriorated.

Matysik had suffered at least three strokes in recent years, although at the time they were diagnosed differently. Simmons noted that at times he would slur his speech, but to the end, his memory was impeccable.

Matysik is a member of the Tragos/Thesz Pro Wrestling Hall of Fame and the Greater St. Louis Wrestling Hall of Fame.

On a personal note, I first started subscribing to the St. Louis programs at the age of 12 and have been close friends with Matysik since college. As far as getting an education in pro wrestling, there has been nobody more valuable in my life. He knew wrestling from a very different manner than almost anyone because of how Muchnick worked with all the different promoters, and learned under Muchnick, one of the greatest promoters of all-time.

He had an innate understanding of wrestling and so often when people would see an angle that looked big, he was almost always on target as to whether it would truly draw or not, as well as what wrestlers were and weren't going to be breakout stars.

NOVEMBER 25, 2018

Larry Matysik, whose contributions to the pro wrestling industry spanned more than 50 years, passed away today at the age of 72.

Obviously Larry Matysik was a very important person in my life. I probably learned more about pro wrestling from him than perhaps any other individual and without a doubt my life would be in a very different place had I not known him and become close friends with him.

I would have first known of him from the early 70s when he would sometimes go on the road for NWA business and while I never met him then and he never came to this area, he was far more approachable to fans than almost any wrestling personality of that era, and was very open about the business. While others came from the carry world of wrestling, he was taught by Sam Muchnick, whose background was as a sportswriter in St. Louis and was one of the most respected people in the St. Louis sports community. So they promoted wrestling very differently, but per capita, St. Louis was on a consistent basis one of the most successful cities for wrestling going back as far as anyone could remember.

We met in 1983. He had quit the St. Louis Wrestling Club, where he was General Manager, because he couldn't handle the differences between an operation run by Muchnick to one run by Bob Geigel, and saw it going down. He attempted to start his own promotion and build around Bruiser Brody and Dick Murdoch, who both went with him even after the NWA made implied threats that it would hamper their careers.

But the business was rapidly changing and he had issues with his original backers. He ended up working for Vince McMahon as his local market rep in St. Louis, although it was uneasy at times as local attendance plummeted after a hot start. Things got so bad that at one point they asked him how to help with the city, and he arranged a Sam Muchnick tournament, and the very next show sold out. But they were running a national business and ultimately you couldn't have a local guy booking market specific, even though they did that to a degree for Montreal.

He had remained around wrestling for decades. He was one of the most popular guests we had when we started our audio shows with Eyada, always ranked in the top five by listeners. He loved booking and announcing wrestling for Herb Simmons and his Southern Illinois Championship Wrestling, and telling stories to the young talent. He was the key person in organizing the St. Louis Wrestling Hall of Fame, which is really the most legitimate single market wrestling Hall of Fame in the world, and rightly, the others behind it surprised him with an induction very early on.

He could talk endlessly about Lou Thesz vs. Pat O'Connor, meeting Martin Thesz, Lou's father, who was so excited to be there for Thesz vs. Karl Gotch, saying that was real wrestling, as well as the Jack Brisco vs Dory Funk Jr. program, which was the 70s version of Okada-Tanahashi as a multi-year feud that produced the best in-ring wrestling as well as consistently strong box office.

The first Brisco-Funk match in St. Louis, which sold out Kiel Auditorium and led to a near riot from people turned away and not being able to get in, solidified Brisco as the heir apparent to the World title.

Larry's father was actually in attendance at the Strangler Lewis vs. Joe Stecher match in St. Louis in 1928 that was the biggest match in some ways of that era, as it matched up the two warring World Champions.

As a fan, Larry dated back to the 50s, and compiled records of St. Louis wrestling from 1959 on which he compiled into a record book. His knowledge of St. Louis wrestling was amazing, which made him such a strong wrestling announcer, and later helped book perhaps the most successful period in the history of the city from 1979 until 1982 through protecting legends and mixing in young stars.

While Ric Flair would have been World Champion at some point either way, both because he was that great of a talent and also because Jim Crockett Jr. had the most successful NWA promotion, but it was Matysik pushing to bring him in and to have him beat Dory Funk Jr. immediately that led to him becoming an instant star in the city, and from that point on, worldwide, it was known he was a potential World Champion. Matysik also put together the famous "Fire and Ice" music video of Flair that aired in virtually every NWA promotion building up his appearances as champion.

In those days, you couldn't be World Champion unless you established yourself with credibility in the St. Louis market, and even more than New York or anywhere else, if you were a main eventer in St. Louis, you were a main eventer everywhere because of the competition and money that went with the top positions in that city.

His close friend Herb Simmons noted that no matter what health issues he had in recent years, stemming from his spine collapsing after battling spinal stenosis, his memory and intellect were always there. From his learning under Muchnick, he had an innate ability to understand wrestling politics and few people were as spot-on in predicting what angles would draw, and what talent would draw and what angles or characters that may have gotten a lot of attention would mean little at the box office.

As many know, my parents fondest memory of me with this industry, the Tragos/Thesz Hall of Fame induction, came specifically due to Matysik, who, due to health problems, was unable to attend his induction, but pushed to everyone that I should be inducted.

Thankfully a lot of his knowledge and understanding of the business was passed on to others, as well as in his many books, and his appearance on the Highspots documentary on Bruiser Brody.

DECEMBER 3, 2018

Larry Matysik, best known as the lead voice of "Wrestling at the Chase," and the protégé of Sam Muchnick, who was a promoter, booker, writer and historian of pro wrestling, passed away on 11/25 at the age of 72.

Matysik had terrible physical issues in recent years, stemming from spinal stenosis and rotary scoliosis that left him wheelchair bound for years and in great pain. Although it was not known until recently, he had also suffered three strokes in recent years. For the past several years he was mostly confined to a rehab center, although until recently had continued to book and announce for Southern Illinois Championship Wrestling, run by longtime friend Herb Simmons.

His health took a turn for the worst when he contracted pneumonia, and was so weakened he could no longer do breathing exercises. He was moved to hospice care and passed away within days.

Matysik was a fan of pro wrestling from childhood. His father attended the famous Strangler Lewis vs. Joe Stecher match in St. Louis in 1928

that unified the two leading versions of the world title that many believed would be a shoot (it was not as Stecher was ready to get out and relinquish his title claim for a big payoff). Ironically, Matysik himself never knew of that fact until his father mentioned it to him shortly before his death.

But he grew up in the 50s watching Texas Wrestling, which aired in St. Louis, and later, "Wrestling at the Chase," which debuted on KPLR-TV inc 1959 and became a local institution.

His start in wrestling came when he sent in an article to *Ring Magazine*, the famous boxing publication that also covered pro wrestling in its pages at the time.

The article was published and with that credit, tried to set up an interview with Sam Muchnick, the St. Louis promoter and President of the National Wrestling Alliance, arguably the most influential person in the industry at the time. Muchnick gave him the interview, liked him, and they stayed in touch.

In 1963, when he was 16, Muchnick hired him to come to the matches and after, call in the results to the area newspapers and other media outlets. He ended up being hired full-time eight years later to work as the office manager and publicist, and basically became Muchnick's right-hand man and protégé.

He started writing "Wrestling News," the program for St. Louis live shows for the January 23, 1970, show. The program had a mailing list of 4,000 subscribers, mostly in the St. Louis area, although many hardcore fans around the country became aware of it and subscribed as well. This wouldn't include the people who purchased it at the arena shows. The program was not considered a profit-maker as much as a publicity device, with the idea of breaking even on the program with the printing and mailing costs but it would publicize the shows and get fans more into the product, making them more likely to attend the live events, which in those days, was where the money was made.

His first night as a full-time employee was January 1, 1971, one of the most memorable nights in St. Louis history and in the long run, a key night in wrestling history. Jack Brisco had gotten a strong buildup, with the storyline that he had developed a counter to the spinning toe hold of Dory Funk Jr. The anticipation of the match was so strong it sold out Kiel Auditorium well in advance, and was a big mistake not to book the Arena. Thousands were turned away, and while St. Louis usually had a reputation for well-behaved fans, that night was the exception. Fans who were turned away started a riot, turning over ticket booths and police had to be called.

Brisco had already been pushed as a future champion and the top babyface in Florida, but when Brisco vs. Funk Jr. sold out in advance in St. Louis, and the word was that they had one of the greatest matches in the history of the city, it became the biggest match in the NWA, and would be held and usually drew well in multiple territories. Brisco's success as a challenger made it clear that he would eventually be Funk Jr.'s replacement as champion. Brisco was even more established as a draw when his next main event, against Blackjack Lanza, managed by Bobby Heenan, also sold out.

On the February 26, 1972 episode of "Wrestling at the Chase" Matysik started as a television announcer on a decision made by Muchnick and KPLR-TV president Harold Kopplar to replace George Abel. Matysik did have some radio sports announcing background starting out. Very quickly, Matysik was considered along with Gordon Solie and Lance Russell as the three premiere wrestling announcers in North America. He was very good at using results of matches in commentary to build future matches, and kept index cards in the office for every wrestler, with the dates and results of all their matches in the days before computers.

The shows, taped at the KPLR studios at the Chase Hotel, and on occasion at the Khorrosan Room, drew roughly 200,000 viewers per week between its two airings over the weekend, usually on Saturday and Sunday. In its early years, the audience consisted of adult men in

suits and ties, women in evening gowns, sitting at fine dining tables while Dick the Bruiser and Gene Kiniski would run around the building.

St. Louis was not part of a wrestling territory. Muchnick was one of the best paying promoters in North America, as to most wrestlers, the names talked about as being the most fair in their payoffs were Muchnick, Paul Boesch in Houston and Don Owen in Oregon.

Muchnick paid 32 percent of the gate revenue to the talent, usually split up as 16 percent of the gate to the main event and dividing the other 16 percent for the rest of the card. With the possible exception of Madison Square Garden, St. Louis was generally the best city for pay when it came to headliners. When they did a big house, the pay was better than a Madison Square Garden main event because of the higher percentage.

Ric Flair used to tell me how much he loved going to St. Louis, although his business acumen wasn't the best, because he noted that for big shows, he'd get \$5,000 payoffs and loved the city so much he'd spend \$10,000 over the weekend.

Aside from the major Northeast heavily populated markets that were built around Bruno Sammartino, St. Louis did consistently bigger gates than just about any other city in the U.S. It was considered the flagship of the National Wrestling Alliance, a conglomerate of regional promoters all over the world. Because of its reputation in the U.S., and its exposure in the Japanese magazines, St. Louis was the place to go to establish someone as a worldwide star and world champion-level performer. If you were used on top in St. Louis, it basically meant you could go anywhere and be a headliner.

Over the years, as Matysik learned the business from Muchnick, he started to get more influence on the creative end. Eventually Muchnick officially made him co-booker in the late 70s, working with Pat O'Connor. It was during the next several years that St. Louis had its most successful business years, mixing the established legends like Harley Race, Dory Funk Jr., Terry Funk, Dick the Bruiser and Jack Brisco, with a younger crew of stars like Ric Flair, Ted DiBiase, Bruiser Brody and The Von Erich Brothers.

"It was such a great time to be a wrestler," remembered Kevin Von Erich. "Larry was young enough that it was like a dose of youth pumped into an already solid company. It was a great town. St. Louis TV was a drag, but it was well worth it."

While Flair would have been world champion no matter what, because of how the NWA transitioned with Jim Crockett becoming the power force and Flair being his top star, he originally was talked about as a future champion stemming from his success in St. Louis, drawing on top and proving he could be a top star outside of his home territory.

Plus, in that era, to even be considered to be world champion, you needed to establish yourself in St. Louis.

Believe it or not, Flair getting into St. Louis was not as easy as you would think. Because he was the top star in the Carolinas, it made no sense to use him unless it was as a top guy, because as mid-carder, he'd make more working his home territory as a headliner. O'Connor argued that he was too small to be a consistent headliner in St. Louis. Matysik pushed hard for him, and put together footage to show Muchnick.

Muchnick saw him, said that he reminded him of Buddy Rogers, the guy who was a key player in Muchnick's success as a promoter. Flair was brought in, and immediately was booked to beat Dory Funk Jr., on January 27, 1978. Funk Jr. was an area legend based on his 1969-73 run as world champion where he averaged 10,703 fans per show running almost exclusively in a building that held less than 11,000. After his title run, Funk Jr. was always protected and only lost sparingly, and always to world championship level guys. That's where the St. Louis booking worked, because the word got out all over town immediately that this new guy had beaten Dory Funk Jr. That win from the start made people in St. Louis see Flair as a future world

champion. Of course, Flair had a great combination of wrestling talent, mic talent and charisma and became a huge attraction.

But Matysik, growing up in St. Louis, also understood protection of legends like Bruiser and Kiniski, who had been around for decades. After he left the promotion, he was furious with how Bruiser was booked, noting that as limited as he was, he was still over to the fans, older fans who had seen him for decades and younger fans who simply knew the name. Matysik always kept Bruiser strong, but made sure to book him with people who could go, and Flair vs. Bruiser for the NWA title was a record setting program. At another point, Matysik argued to bring Kiniski back for a title match with Flair. That was another argument because of the feeling Kiniski was too old to headline. Matysik noted that telling the right story of Kiniski's last chase of the title would work, and while they didn't sell out, they came very close to it, and historically in the city he saw it as important that Flair held a win, using his figure four, over a legend like Kiniski, with a finish that he won the second fall with the figure four and Kiniski couldn't answer the bell for the third fall, which got the move over strong. Later, the move became trivialized.

It was also a unique market because of the respect pro wrestling had in the community. Muchnick, who started as a sportswriter who covered the St. Louis Cardinals, but lost his job when the newspaper he worked for folded, ended up working as the publicist for Tom Packs, who promoted wrestling and some boxing, and was one of the key figures in the wrestling industry at the time since he controlled the leading world heavyweight championship.

After an issue where Muchnick felt he was shorted on pay for his promotional work for a major boxing match that drew a big house, he started his own promotion in 1942. Muchnick struggled, trying to build around wrestlers like Lewis, who were long past their prime, and then had to close up when he served in World War II.

In 1948, Muchnick along with several other promoters, formed the National Wrestling Alliance, with the main goal at first to share talent. The key was that this gave Muchnick access to Rogers, an incredible drawing card who turned his company around. By this point Packs had sold the promotion to a conglomerate headed by Lou Thesz, the homegrown wrestling superstar who held the National Wrestling Association world heavyweight championship.

Muchnick was behind in the wrestling war until Rogers changed the balance of power. Muchnick and Thesz, who had a friendship since Muchnick was the publicist when Packs promoted the 21-year-old Thesz and made him the local superstar and world heavyweight champion, worked out a deal. While publicly they would still keep the idea there were two different companies, with Martin Thesz, Lou's father, and Muchnick as the different promoters, they were really one group using much of the same talent and storylines until years later publicly merging as Muchnick's St. Louis Wrestling Club.

Muchnick eventually became the President of the NWA. In the early years, the president role rotated around, but Muchnick was in that role for most of the period from 1950 to 1975, until he got fed up by a slight at an alliance meeting and quit. While many think of this as a romantic period of harmony and legendary touring champions, the NWA had its hardships and Muchnick on more than one occasion considered shutting it all down, as he was the glue holding it together.

Muchnick and Matysik had a close relationship but for the most part Matysik always talked of his mentor in reverent terms. Based on my long relationship with Matysik, my belief is that his proudest moment in wrestling was the January 1, 1982, Sam Muchnick retirement show at the Checkerdome in St. Louis, which drew an advanced sellout of 19,819 fans for a show headlined by Ric Flair vs. Dusty Rhodes. But it was one of the few times where the house was really drawn by the promoter and they could have easily drawn closer to 30,000 fans or more if the building was large enough.

The entire city paid tribute to Muchnick, with Matysik working tirelessly at setting it up, including bringing back stars from the past, numerous community leaders and even Muchnick's first television announcer

from "Wrestling at the Chase," Joe Garagiola, who had become a major television star as the sports host of "The Today Show," subbing regularly for Johnny Carson on "The Tonight Show" and handling NBC's Major League Baseball Game of the Week announcing.

"This was both the greatest and the saddest night in St. Louis wrestling history," said Matysik. "The ceremony and party for Sam Muchnick went like clockwork and presented a montage of local celebrities and dignitaries unmatched anywhere for a wrestling promoter. The video of St. Louis Wrestling Classics Volume X is the best place to get some of the feeling of the excitement of the night. Wrestling did itself proud. Yet, somehow, we probably all knew that it would never be the same again.

Three weeks later, due to tax problems, O'Connor moved back to New Zealand, so Matysik was the sole booker as well as running the office, although Bob Geigel, as the majority owner, was the person making all the final calls.

That was the peak, but it went downhill quickly. Muchnick sold his stock to Harley Race, Geigel, O'Connor and Verne Gagne. Matysik was named General Manager, so he was the person in theory in charge of the company, working out of the St. Louis office. But things were different. Muchnick was both in charge and owner. Matysik was publicly in charge, but not the owner and felt, rightly so, that the Kansas City crew didn't understand what made St. Louis a strong market. He would note that St. Louis would draw more for 17 dates a year than Kansas City would for 52, but they wanted to run St. Louis the way they ran Kansas City.

While a minor fight in the grand scheme of things, in a prelim match on a show on June 12, 1982, Rufus Jones beat The Masked Superfly. Muchnick had established since the beginning of time that a masked wrestler would lose his mask the first time he lost. It was unique to the city and even though Geigel had worked in St. Louis for decades, he either didn't know or didn't care. Matysik, after the match, insisted Superfly unmask. He, clearly, wasn't going to do that and didn't know the city's tradition. He went to the back, and Matysik announced that Superfly was Ray Candy. Geigel asked why he said that. He said that in St. Louis, when a masked man loses, he has to unmask and reveal his name. Geigel said that they don't do that in Kansas City, and wouldn't be doing it in St. Louis either. Matysik said the fans watching on television knowing the rules expected the unmasking and nobody ever told them differently.

Crowds were already starting to drop in late 1982. The debut of Hulk Hogan coming off Rocky III, sent in by Gagne, had only drawn 3,499 fans, nearly a record low.

In November 1982, they were planning a major show for February 11, 1983, at the Checkerdome, coming off bad houses. The original idea was Flair vs. Kerry Von Erich, since that match was also being built up for Christmas night in Dallas and Gary Hart had set up strong angles that played on World Class Championship Wrestling. Matysik's idea was to have Kerry beat Harley Race to win the Missouri State title, but Race refused to put Kerry over, saying, since he was a partner, he wasn't going to become like Jack Brisco, who Race felt was a former world champion who had been used so often to get new stars over that he was no longer viewed as strongly. Matysik felt Von Erich needed that big local win to try and fill a 19,000-seat building, plus Race already had clean wins over Von Erich. Race agreed to drop the Missouri title, but only via DQ in a title can change hands via DQ match. The other partners agreed to the title change in that manner, protecting Race. Matysik argued that after such a flat win, Flair vs. Von Erich wouldn't be a hot program, but that Brody was more over in the market. Geigel agreed they would go with Brody. Matysik was frustrated as booker, and ready to quit, and had even told Brody he was quitting on January 1, 1983. Brody begged him to stay through February 11, 1983, because Flair vs. Brody was so big that All Japan was going to tape the match for its television, and Giant Baba was coming to work with Race for the PWF title. As it turned out, for the obvious political reasons, Race ended up losing via clean pin to Baba. Brody said that with him not in the office, they would screw up the buildup and the television promoting the match.

Muchnick was also fed up, because the rule for St. Louis wrestling was that they always kept enough money in the business account before dividing up the profits to the stockholders that when any bill or invoice came in the morning mail, it was paid by Noon. Geigel switched accountants, would distribute the profits after every show instead of every quarter, and at times the account would be low and bills would not be paid immediately. It was never that bad, and the bills were paid, but Muchnick no longer wanted a direct association with a company whose reputation he feared would be less than pristine in his home city.

Still, January 1, 1983 was a big night and Flair and Butch Reed's one hour draw sold out Kiel Auditorium. On January 21, Matysik booked Rick Martel vs. Ox Baker with the idea of Martel going over to start pushing him as a new babyface star. He had booked an angle where Martel would arrive late, Baker would be beating up on Spike Huber, Martel would show up in street clothes and beat Baker in less than one minute. It was an angle that had great impact 25 years ago in St. Louis when Muchnick did it with Johnny Valentine as the late arriving babyface against Dick the Bruiser, which Matysik fondly remembered. To make it real, Martel really did arrive late on purpose to the building so nobody backstage would think it was an angle. But Geigel nixed the idea, saying that they were pushing Baker in Kansas City and didn't want him losing. Kansas City was a different territory, and this wasn't even on television. Baker threw Martel over the top rope for the DQ, and the crowd could have cared less.

Flair vs. Brody drew 16,695 fans for a 60 minute draw that was one of the most memorable matches of the glory days of St. Louis. Flair always called it one of his biggest matches ever. Matysik, when asked frequently about the greatest matches of that era, always listed this one along with the many Jack Brisco vs. Dory Funk Jr., matches and Thesz vs. O'Connor matches in the 50s and 60s as the best ones. This would be the only major arena main event from St. Louis that still exists in television form (there were some major 70s matches with silent 8 mm tapes that Mike Gratchner did that also exist) because Muchnick never taped matches from the arena shows, and also, because he didn't see the future in that sense, never saved the tapes of the Chase shows either. The only footage from the era that was saved were tapes Matysik himself saved with his videotape recorder off television in his last few years working for the company, and some black and white shows that Garagiola found decades later when cleaning up his home that he had saved. Nippon TV taped this show because of the Flair vs. Brody and Baba vs. Race double main event for Baba's All Japan television show.

With elevated prices, they set the city gate record. Flair & Brody's payoff was supposed to be about \$7,300, but Geigel overruled it, even though that was the established percentage for the city at the time. In that era, main event pay in Madison Square Garden was \$5,000 for the champion and usually \$3,000 for the challenger. Bruno Sammartino would get \$6,000, but he had retired years earlier. Geigel said that nobody deserved more than \$6,000 for a match, and paid both Flair and Brody just under \$6,000.

Brody remembered the slight, and shortly thereafter, no-showed a major event promoted by Geigel in Des Moines as payback and then went with Matysik as opposition to Geigel in St. Louis.

"I actually notified the partners I was done the day after the Checkerdome show. They were shocked, even after our difficult year together. Truthfully, I was sick about it myself. Harley Race, Bob Geigel and Pat O'Connor all did their best with what they knew about wrestling. Sadly, their background was totally different from mine and Sam Muchnick. But the figure in St. Louis, especially without Sam as the balancing point, looked bleak. In the end, I had no status as a stockholder if the promotion drifted more and more in a direction opposite from what St. Louis had always been. Plus, the NWA was a shadow of what it had been. For me, it was time to move in a different direction."

Due to Muchnick's background, being a sportswriter, and his social friends were all the key members of St. Louis sports society, and bigwigs of the baseball and football teams and the reporters and other

people high up in sports. While wrestling wasn't a pure sport, it was presented in St. Louis like it was. Results of matches were important. Referees were kept strong and never abused. Once, on February 10, 1973, when Muchnick had an engagement that led to him arriving late at the television taping where Terry Funk defeated Johnny Valentine to win the Missouri state title by hitting Valentine's knee with the ring bell before using his spinning toe hold and it was in front of the referee, who didn't call for a DQ knowing the planned title change, he was livid. He ordered Funk to drop the title to Gene Kiniski at his next title defense, changing booking plans.

But the key to the public of Muchnick's world revolved around the world heavyweight championship. Muchnick booked the champion through 1975, and was hands on. Promoters could do screw job finishes and build their local guys, but in the end, in every feud, the champion had to prevail. After 1975, when Jim Barnett took over as the booker of the champion, everything changed. Still, in St. Louis, under Muchnick, the world champion always won the blow-off match in a program so it kept the title as the strong focal point and made the champion seem larger-than-life.

The promoters wanted the change, and the era of the champion losing via DQ and repeated screwjobs became commonplace, a practice Muchnick never would let get out of hand. But with Muchnick, the job of the champion was hard, because instead of screwjobs, the champion would often be booked to do 60 minute draws.

Matysik noted that when Muchnick stepped down in 1975, that several people told him that it would eventually lead to the end of the NWA. The NWA definitely changed, although its demise, as territories weakened largely due to cable changing the game, was inevitable, and came more than a decade later.

Matysik also revealed that in 1973, Muchnick was so fed up that he and Vince McMahon Sr., talked and that the Bruno Sammartino (who was not WWWF champion at the time, as it was the period between his title runs when he was a free agent) vs. NWA champion Harley Race match and frequent Sammartino appearances were in part to get Sammartino exposure in case he would make a switch.

Probably the best example of the St. Louis booking style and how it worked in the city involved Flair.

Of all the champions in NWA history, it was Flair's run from September 1981 to June 1983 when Matysik and O'Connor booked his programs that was the most successful at the gate, averaging 13,086 paid per title defense, beating the prior record of 11,076 during the Chase years for Buddy Rogers and 10,737 for Lou Thesz during his 1963-66 run. Keep in mind that most shows were at Kiel Auditorium, which held just under 11,000 fans, but with Flair, because business was so strong, they ran more events at the 19,000-seat Checkerdome.

But, if you look at Flair as champion after Matysik quit, until the end of the St. Louis Wrestling Club, that period saw Flair as the weakest drawing NWA Champion in St. Louis history.

Even though Matysik could take credit for booking the most successful championship run in the history of the city, he never did. I saw the records and knew, but he never brought it up. He did take pride in the Flair vs. Dick the Bruiser feud, drawing a sellout of 19,027 at the Checkerdome when it was felt Bruiser was washed up, in a match Flair talked about for decades as the night he finally realized he was what he had claimed for years that he was. He was able to take a broken down 53-year-old man, who looked every bit of it, and with his selling, made people think it was 20 years earlier.

"Ric Flair came along at a great time," Matysik said. "The business was red-hot and the rapport between Muchnick and The Checkerdome was excellent. Thus, more cards were scheduled for the Checkerdome. Of course, one reason that business was so on fire was Flair himself. The business collapsed after February 1983 and was not really the same as it had been."

In his "St. Louis Wrestling Record Book: 1959 to 1983," he wrote that St. Louis was the "magic town of wrestling" until the 80s, when the changes in the business meant no single location would ever be so crucial again.

"New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Toronto and Montreal are all correctly celebrated, yet St. Louis had, of all of them, by far the smallest population base with which to work. St. Louis, with the occasional Arena show added, drew comparable, large crowds. Thus, the percentage of population involved in supporting wrestling was likely higher in St. Louis than in much bigger towns.

"St. Louis never suffered the terrible, flat periods many other spots did. During the difficult late 1950s, when television was spotty, St. Louis never lost money. Actually, two promotions of which Sam Muchnick owned more than 50 percent of each (this is when the Muchnick promotion and the Thesz promotion in the 50s were promoted as two different groups even though Muchnick actually ran both and Thesz was the champion on both), both turned profits annually."

"Perhaps most importantly, though, was how wrestling was regarded differently and with more respect in St. Louis than anywhere else. Even if the media and political powers knew wrestling was a work, they still regarded the sport and its performers with affection and respect not found anywhere else. The product was even different to some extent, with emphasis on winning, losing and athleticism."

Of course, things were different after Matysik left. St. Louis became a two promotion city. First, it was the short-lived Greater St. Louis Wrestling Enterprises, Matysik's promotion. Then it was the WWF, which debuted to huge success at the end of 1983. WWF largely had the advantage, although the St. Louis Wrestling Club was able to draw sellouts for Flair's matches with Kerry Von Erich and Bruiser Brody until they just burned both matches out by doing them so frequently, since they couldn't draw with any other main events. One Flair vs. Race title match only drew 1,000 fans. Shortly after, they folded, and Jim Crockett Promotions took over, and also never did very well in the city. WWF had some successes and failures, doing okay, until coming back strong in 1997 under Steve Austin. The city did big business, as did everywhere, during the Monday Night Wars and is now, both for its regularly getting the NCAA Division I tournament, and WWE PPV shows, perhaps the strongest market in the country for a city of its size.

I probably learned more about pro wrestling, not so much the history, but certainly the history in St. Louis, but the real psychology in the ring, but far more, of the personalities, the cons and both the good and bad aspects of the business from Matysik than anyone else. He was a close personal friend, very much a mentor, and the reality is my life and this newsletter would likely be completely different without him.

I think he saw the similar background. Like Muchnick and himself, all of our backgrounds were in journalism first and then wrestling, not the other way around. Had he not been hired by Muchnick as a teenager, I have no doubt he'd have done a newsletter, or bulletin, the term he always used for the Observer.

He was a very intelligent man, had a great innate sense of what would and wouldn't work in wrestling, and he was right a higher percentage than most. He probably should have done far more in the wrestling industry after 1983, because he understood the business far more than the people in charge of most companies. But ultimately, he didn't want to move from St. Louis, where his wife had a steady job as a school teacher, to push for a position in Stamford, CT, or Atlanta.

He was part of a unique generation, in some ways similar to Mike Graham, Joel Watts and Greg Gagne, where it appeared that their fathers were grooming them to eventually take over the business. Muchnick had his own sons, but he steered them away from wrestling (one son, Dick, who became a doctor, was the ringside physician at his father's shows) so Matysik was the person he chose early on to groom to take over for him.

But when that day came, cable television and Vince McMahon changed the game. Some blame McMahon for killing the territories, and he certainly was a key factor in speeding up the process. But cable television made their demise inevitable. Eventually someone was going to get the key outlets and control the most marketable talent, and they would force everyone else to either play ball with them or die without them. With McMahon, he didn't really want to play ball with anyone to begin with.

I first knew of Matysik as a name in magazines, the publicist and television announcer in St. Louis, as Muchnick's right-hand man. St. Louis used to have a subscription service for its programs, and from the age of 12, I'd read his writing about the big matches and stars, see the level and talent and read about the big houses when the new program would come the mail every few weeks. We'd get them just prior to the shows at Kiel Auditorium, or The Arena. Even without television, you could read the program and see the direction, what young wrestlers were getting a push, who was getting a series of wins that ultimately would lead to the next world or Missouri state title shot. While Madison Square Garden was the key arena, and Florida (and later Mid Atlantic Championship Wrestling) had the best wrestling territory, St. Louis was the place as far as the best wrestling talent top to bottom, with the top of the card coming across as almost an all-star team.

He was one of the first people to discover the Observer when it started. We first traded letters around when he quit the St. Louis Wrestling Club for the first time. He was pretty guarded, as wrestling was a closed business, but to a wrestling fan, the idea that Larry Matysik, who promoted the NWA St. Louis office and protégé of Muchnick, would quit was clearly a sign that something was wrong in what people on the outside considered Camelot, and as Matysik would look back at times, it often was under Muchnick. He explained the reasons he felt he had to do it.

We met in Houston by chance. He was trying to put together a business deal with Joe Blanchard's Southwest Championship Wrestling to get talent for his opposition Greater St. Louis Wrestling Enterprises group, and also went to a Paul Boesch show the next night. He was far more open than most in wrestling, but he knew who I was and how hard I worked. It was a period of frustration, battling the existing promotion and looking for the endorsement of Muchnick, which never fully came.

Matysik at the time felt he was doing exactly what Sam did when he quit Tom Packs, one of the most powerful promoters in the country, to start on his own. It was the comparison he always made, while the people who owned the company expected him to quickly fail. It was the era of dirty tricks. He was told that his opposition would call his home on nights he was on the road and try and tell his wife that he was fooling around, and that talent would be told it was career suicide to work his shows.

He started by building around Bruiser Brody, who hated promoters but had a very different view of Muchnick and Matysik, who he never had a problem with; along with Dick Murdoch, a star in Japan who liked Matysik who always pushed him strong as booker. The third star, Blackjack Mulligan, who was to feud with Brody on top as they got off the ground, no-showed the first card. His shows were drawing between 4,500 and 6,800 fans, amazing for an independent group, and the same or better than the NWA promotion with access to far more stars.

Muchnick's stance was that he would neither ever go against his partners in the company he created, but also would never go against his protégé. Matysik largely understood, but at times was frustrated feeling he was the good guy and they were the bad guys who were ruining the St. Louis wrestling that Muchnick built. Matysik, to me, wished it was different but understood Muchnick staying neutral. Brody, on the other hand, felt Muchnick should have taken a stand.

Ultimately, Matysik felt the mentality the Kansas City crew had would make St. Louis just another city, both in popularity but also respectability. Muchnick would be furious with his offices at the Chase Hotel, and when Geigel was NWA President, while they'd work in their

business attire, he'd show up in flip flops and shorts and Muchnick would roll his eyes that the president of the NWA would come to the office dressed like that.

Matysik felt he knew the market and would struggle for talent at first, but ultimately, just as Muchnick struggled for years as the No. 2 group, eventually as happened with Muchnick, being the better promoter, who paid the talent a fair percentage, would win out. Then, once the fences were mended, he'd have access to the top talent because it was St. Louis.

He was friends with the Von Erichs, whose television ran in St. Louis and was on fire at the time. David Von Erich, who at the time was the biggest star of the brothers in St. Louis, outright wanted to join him. Fritz, as part of the NWA, was more neutral. But he let Matysik have Terry Gordy, one of his biggest stars, as a prelude to getting Michael Hayes, one of the most charismatic performers of the era. His sons stayed with the Kansas City side, but Fritz was clearly playing both sides of the fence. Still, he told Matysik exactly what Muchnick told him in the 60s when he was involved with his own territorial war with the longstanding local promoters, and with his friendship and backing of Muchnick, he won that war. Muchnick made him promise that if he won, he would hire the people he beat, so that the business would stay harmonious and they wouldn't be bitter in public and hurt the business. Fritz told Larry the same advice, telling him that when you win, you have to make up with them and hire them in some form.

But things completely changed. Matysik had issues with Delaware North, the company that was financing him. He made the decision to close up, even though they were drawing well. He told Brody, who argued the point, noting the opposition was weakening and they were already drawing evenly while they had access to far more talent, and as more wrestlers saw their success, they'd be willing to break ranks and come. But Matysik had issues with his money partners not doing what they had promised and didn't want to get a bad reputation in town. But that was kept quiet, and Matysik told Brody to tell the other side he was leaving Matysik and ready to come back, not that they were closing. With the rival promotion pushing Brody so hard as their flagship star, Flair vs. Brody, already a proven draw in the market, which never had a clean finish (and never would) was the biggest match the St. Louis Wrestling Club could put on. When Flair vs. Brody immediately sold out, Brody told Matysik to come to the show and enjoy it, saying that he was the architect of the sellout house. He didn't.

At the same time, Matysik, who knew everyone in key places personally since Muchnick was grooming him, found out that KPLR-TV was going to break ties with Geigel's group. They felt the TV shows were terrible and ratings were falling badly. They would send the company letters complaining about the quality of the shows and ultimately, when the problems weren't addressed, made the call to pull the plug.

The St. Louis Wrestling Club blamed McMahon, and sometimes Matysik, for stealing their television time, but the reality was the opening came because the station saw how quickly the ratings were dropping with the new style booking.

However, they had a long successful history with wrestling. Matysik felt that getting KPLR-TV would change the game, and was the key to the winning hand, and was preparing to reopen, with Brody jumping back.

Vince McMahon also found out about the problems in St. Louis, possibly from Matysik, since the two knew each other somewhat for years. They were about the same age, and in the 70s, it was expected that Vince McMahon Sr. (as he was known) was grooming Junior (a moniker that Vince hated to the point that he would ban the term from his product, so Rey Misterio Jr., and Chavo Guerrero Jr., didn't use the junior). They were going to be the next generation power brokers of the industry.

Ted Kopplar, who ran KPLR-TV, had met with both and called a meeting with both of them. Matysik and Vince had been talking already. Vince almost surely knew about Matysik trying to get the time

slot. I'm not sure at the time how much Matysik knew about Vince, but he knew when Kopplar arranged the joint meeting.

Kopplar said that he admired Vince's ambition, plus he had access to a strong talent roster and had agreed to tape in St. Louis at the Arena, with the idea it would be more impressive than the traditional studio setup. McMahon had also offered the station \$2,100 per week and five percent of the live gates, plus the station would get money because McMahon would do a lot of his television production with them. He told Vince that Larry knew the market, knew everyone in the market, and had a great local reputation, and suggested the two become partners in St. Louis.

Both agreed.

Of course Vince wanted no partners. Shortly after the meeting, Jim Barnett, the Head of Operations for Titan Sports, called Matysik to tell him there would be no partnership, but Matysik would be the local promoter and get a straight salary.

Matysik worked for McMahon from 1984 to 1993 until being let go. The relationship was always strained because the two had a different philosophy of wrestling. At one point, when ratings declined in St. Louis, McMahon came up with the idea that instead of using WWF announcers, they would sent the tapes in St. Louis and Matysik, known in town as the wrestling announcer, would voice over the product. At another time, after drawing just 2,600 fans to a show, McMahon came to him for advice, and he put together a one-night Sam Muchnick tournament and sold it on wrestling, and they sold out Kiel. But obviously, somebody locally booking a city independently was never going to work out in the long run.

But Matysik was frustrated and at times even embarrassed by the product. While St. Louis had its issues on occasion with rowdy fans, such as the 1971 riot in front of the building where they turned over all the ticket booths from the thousands turned away at the first Dory Funk Jr. meeting with Jack Brisco, it was relatively safe. In every program, Matysik would write a blurb about how the St. Louis fans were known for their class and would never throw things at the ring, so psychologically, fans almost never did. That changed with WWF in 1984, although McMahon did big business early and even got some national attention when they would broadcast the matches live on local radio like a sports team, something that happened a few times years earlier with Muchnick. But that ended when the sports guys saw a rowdier fan base that was throwing things all over the building, and the reputation of wrestling fans that the cultivated from the suits and evening gown crowd in the early 60s on Wrestling at the Chase, was changing.

He hated when he'd go out in public and people would talk about how great wrestling used to be and how bad it had become. Instead of the constant praise and excitement he was used to, he was in the role of an apologist saying that the philosophies were different but they were also a very successful organization. Eventually they decided against continuing with Matysik as announcer. And finally, ratings continued to fall under McMahon until KPLR-TV canceled wrestling.

People ask why Matysik was never used as an announcer by WWF. But his style of announcing didn't fit Vince's over-the-top vision of the product. Once, when Howard Finkel did some play-by-play of WWF shows, and was actually amazingly good at it, we both talked about it. Few know this because they never saw it, but Finkel would have been the best announcer WWF had at that time, but he never got to do it again. Matysik complimented him on his work and Finkel thanked him and noted that "guys like you and I aren't what they are looking for," meaning they were looking for a look and an image, and not so much the ability to call a wrestling match. Still, both men at the time were more youthful and far better than the older guys Vince delighted in stealing from Verne Gagne, that he gave shots to before tiring of. Ironically, years later, Jim Ross, who wasn't the same as those two, but far closer to them than anyone in WWF at the time, became the wrestling voice to a generation of WWE fans.

At the same time, Matysik worked with Herb Simmons and Brody to do regular wrestling shows, that usually drew steady crowds and at times even big crowds. Because of Brody's popularity, they were probably the most successful independent operation going. Matysik's involvement was largely low-keyed since he was working for McMahon, so he never promoted the shows, but did attend, helped out, and Simmons noted that he got his PHD in the wrestling business after every show going out with Matysik, Brody and sometimes Murdoch.

In the end, Simmons became his closest friend, while continuing to promote shows in the area for more than three decades.

In 1988, things changed drastically.

I was woken up one morning very early with a phone call from Dennis Brent, who had been told by Bill Moody (Paul Bearer, or Percy Pringle, as he was known at the time) that Brody had been stabbed to death in the dressing room in Puerto Rico by Jose Gonzalez, better known as Invader I.

In a panic, I called Matysik. He was calm, and quite frankly, didn't believe it. We'd been through so many stories of wrestlers dying that were fake and wrong. But he called Barbara Goodish, Brody's wife. There was no answer, so he figured there was nothing to it. He called me back a few minutes later and said he didn't buy it. There was no Internet in those days and news didn't travel that fast usually in wrestling.

Then, and I don't recall if he called me or I called him, but I was on the phone with Dory Funk Jr., who I knew had strong ties to Puerto Rico. But he confirmed the news was real. I called Matysik. He was stunned. Later I heard a story that he went on his exercise bike, filled with emotion, pedaled so fast and furiously that he destroyed the bike.

That changed a lot of things. I've wondered, and he did as well, what would have happened just a few months later if Brody was still alive.

When Turner Broadcasting purchased WCW, the people picked to oversee the wrestling company was Jack Petrik, who came from St. Louis where he was a program director. He hired Jim Herd, a fellow program director in St. Louis who was the Director of Wrestling at the Chase. Of course, the first person both went to for advice was Muchnick, who steered them to Matysik, who they both knew, with the idea he should come in and be the booker.

The only thing that really transpired was Herd's first major issue. Flair was world champion and he and Rhodes, the booker, were having issues. Rhodes was Flair's hero at one point, as when Flair started, he wanted to be Cowboy Ricky Rhodes, Dusty's younger brother. Verne Gagne told him to be his own person, and he became Ric Flair. Rhodes was a superstar years before Flair, and a proven draw. The company had a strong growth period in 1985 and 1986, but started having issues in 1987 due to attempted expansion and cost of maintaining a syndicated television network. Plus the Starrcade 87 PPV debacle cost them more than a million dollars, which they badly needed.

The sale hadn't completely gone through when Flair was threatening to quit, because Rhodes had booked Starrcade for Rick Steiner to win title from Flair in a cage match in six minutes. Basically, Rhodes booked an idea to get Flair to quit. Herd was afraid that if Flair quit, that Turner may pull out of the purchase, since Flair was considered such an important part of the organization to Turner himself. It needs to be pointed out that most at the executive level were not big on owning wrestling company, but to Turner, wrestling helped build the Superstation and he, while not following the business closely, did have an affinity for the product.

Herd called Matysik, who pretty much told him to insist that Starrcade be changed to Flair vs. Lex Luger, who was a much bigger star than Steiner. Steiner was booked in the match as a shooter more than anything to make sure the title changed hands, quickly and as planned.

He also told Herd to insist Flair won the match, feeling the title had been damaged too greatly already by all the inconclusive finishes.

Exactly what happened with Matysik and booking WCW isn't exactly known. Barnett told me at the time that he felt Matysik wasn't the right guy and likely expressed that to Herd. Herd did offer Matysik a job for more than he had earned with WWF, but Matysik, upon hearing what other people were being offered to work there, found the offer insulting. Quite frankly, it was. There were people who didn't know the business half as well that were getting triple what he was making in positions he should have been in. Plus he wasn't willing to move to Atlanta, although Herd never moved himself, living in a hotel during the week and flying back to St. Louis every weekend.

We both talked about what would have happened had Brody been alive. He'd have had more leverage with the idea of bringing in Brody, who probably would have pushed harder for Matysik to get more power. If Brody was there, perhaps he'd have been more willing to go. Of course, Brody, used to All Japan, which he wouldn't have given up, and its level or organization, would have had trouble not blowing up with the disorganization and lack of knowledge from so many at the top in WCW. It's all a lot of what if's.

Matysik's St. Louis booking would have been difficult with a 1989 audience that had seen the booking of McMahon and Rhodes. Even Muchnick, after attending a WWF live event, told Matysik that things have changed and how we presented the product wouldn't work to this audience. But he was also a smart guy and wouldn't have done complete 1981 St. Louis in 1989, and would have learned from the ratings, demos and market forces. There are a lot of what if's, but that's all they are.

Aside from working with Simmons on independent shows, and working as a part-time police officer in Belleville, IL.

He continued to do writing about wrestling. Few know it, but Matysik continued writing for wrestling magazines for decades. He would do articles under pseudonyms like Lonnie Mars for "Wrestling World," all the while working for Muchnick, who knew, and McMahon, who probably didn't given his attempts to put all of the magazines out of business during that era. Wrestling World's top 50 ratings each month compiled by the Mattingly Sports Bureau were actually Matysik, trying to mix a combination of kayfabe who was being pushed, names people would know, mentioning but vastly underrating the Japanese talent because he knew that nobody knew them, and trying to give a little boost to people who were strong bell-to-bell.

He later developed a relationship with Michael Holmes of ECW Press, who considered Matysik something of a wrestling mentor as well. He wrote books like "Wrestling at the Chase: The Inside Story of Sam Muchnick and the Legends of Professional Wrestling," "Brody: The Triumph and Tragedy of Wrestling's Rebel," with Barbara Goodish, "Drawing Heat the Hard Way: How Wrestling Really Works," with his thoughts on the evolution and changes in the business, and the controversial, "The 50 Greatest Professional Wrestlers of All Time: The Definitive Shoot." Of course as I learned when John Molinaro did a similar book using the Wrestling Observer brand name, you simply can't do a book like that without everyone being mad, because everyone has different opinions.

He also helped put together a documentary with KPLR-TV in 1999, on the 40th anniversary of the debut of the show called "Wrestling at the Chase: A Look Back," hosted by Bob Costas, which not only drew strong ratings, but was critically received and nominated for local television awards.

In 2009, he and Simmons had the idea of doing a 50th anniversary Wrestling at the Chase show at the Khorrosan Room, figuring the idea would be an easy sellout, given the publicity it would get. But the hotel was under new management by that time, which didn't come from St. Louis. While some who were local liked the idea, the management had the prevailing opinion of pro wrestling and its fans, and didn't want pro wrestling in their ballroom.

He helped create the St. Louis Wrestling Hall of Fame, and worked to keep it credible. He was a huge supporter of the Observer Hall of Fame, and we did many shows, and far more discussions over the years privately, debating the merits of various candidates, particularly those I had seen live that he hadn't, and visa versa.

In 2014, he was inducted into the Tragos/Thesz Pro Wrestling Hall of Fame in Waterloo, IA, given the Jim Melby Award for his writings on the industry. By that time his physical condition had deteriorated to where he couldn't make the trip there.

"Receiving the Melby Award is a tremendous honor, partially because I knew Jim well and respected all of his work in the field of writing about the business. And partially because I accept it as recognition of the writing I did for legendary St. Louis promoter Sam Muchnick, especially doing the "Wrestling News" (the program) for him. And partially because the Melby Award is a wonderful salute for the books I've written and enjoyed every single moment writing them."

When talking with the people there, he pushed very hard for me to be inducted as well. Without him, most likely, neither myself, Wade Keller nor Scott Williams would have gotten that honor. That honor means a lot to me today, not so much for the ego aspect, but because it was the one time my parents got to see something like this, before they got too old that they couldn't have attended.

He told me outright that he wanted to me go, partially because he couldn't and had wanted to so badly. He also said that to him, getting the award would mean so much more to him if he was on a list that included me, and if not, it wouldn't have nearly the same meaning.

I hope over the years I was able to convey in some way how pivotal he was in my life and what a major part he played in it. He would always thank me for keeping him interested, as he would have long since given up, and probably been bitter about how the business changed, otherwise. From the time he was in his early 20s, and certainly through his early 30s, he knew exactly where his life would go professionally. He was being hand-taught to be the next Sam Muchnick in St. Louis and in the NWA. He was a local celebrity and part of a local sports entertainment company that everyone knew about, a large percentage of the population watched religiously, and was very much an institution in town, and in its field, was known all over the world. And then, at 38, everything changed.

For me, at about the same time in life, everything also changed, but unlike with him, for me, it was ultimately for the better.

When we had our Eyada show, Matysik always finished strongly, always top five, in surveys regarding the favorite guest on the show. We had him on regularly through 2016, including great appearances on shows after the death of Jack Brisco and Randy Savage, as well as Hall of Fame and history talks.

He was working on a book that would compare Muchnick with McMahon, as the only person who ever worked for both, and their respective eras. While they were the two most powerful figures in pro wrestling at different times, aside from that, the two had very little in common. The bottom line is McMahon was always more financially successful, but in the end, both lived the life they wanted. McMahon was a crazy workaholic, and Muchnick wanted to do a credible job promoting shows every few weeks, making a nice living, and living a normal life and going to area sports events and public functions. Muchnick cared about respect from his peers, city officials, the sports community and even those in wrestling. He wanted wrestling to be respected, but he could only control that in his home city, and realized his city was unique. Matysik was brought up with the same value structure. He loved wrestling, enjoyed working in it, but as much as it would be what he was known for, it was not his life, only a part of it.

While he always trained hard to be in shape, his body turned against him in his 50s. It started with minor things, but it got more major. It started as a minor limp he didn't take care of. He didn't realize until too late about his spinal stenosis. Later, his spine collapsed. He was in

great pain, talking about how he understood how people could get addicted to pain medications because of how badly he was hurting without it. Before things got so bad that he couldn't travel, he would debate going to Boston to see his daughter, Kelly, a star volleyball player growing up and whose games he never missed, something that wouldn't have happened had he stayed immersed in the wrestling business. Several years ago, he believed he had suffered a stroke, which was the beginning of the end.

Later, he was told doctors felt it wasn't a stroke, and it wasn't until recent months that they found he had suffered three strokes over the years. At first he was fine talking, but in the end, the strokes did impact his speaking. He would always note that everything physically was bad but his mind was never affected.

But his condition was such after his first scare that evidently was a stroke, that he could never return home. He was in great pain trying to type, so writing became difficult. He would tell me he'd work through the pain, but could only go so long before it became unbearable. But he loved announcing and booking wrestling and Simmons' local promotion gave his mind something to do. He enjoyed when the old-timers would be brought in for shows, and to most of them, one of the reasons they liked doing the shows was so they could spend time with him. For people from a certain generation, he had tremendous respect across the board.

I know that in the Ring of Honor offices, there is a phrase, called "page 128." It's from that page of his book, "Drawing Heat the Hard Way."

I actually learned the page 128 lesson from Paul Boesch, although Matysik had made them clear many times over the years. Vince McMahon used to have the same motto and beliefs, but he would always refer to a conversation he claimed his father had with Bobo Brazil. Basically, that if an event doesn't draw well live, all the excuses from weather to economy to other events in town may have a slight impact, but in the end, if people don't come, it's because either you didn't promote it well enough or you presented an attraction they weren't interested in seeing.

In life, you go through many phases. You move in and out of different social groups, in some cases by choice, in others by fate. A select few people change your lives in major ways. While hardly the only person, Matysik very much was a key in teaching me the underlying aspects, both the rewarding, the dishonest, what to look for, and so many other things, at a young age, and was a constant at an older age, even if it was just quick notes with the results of matches the night before and where he was going with the booking. With the death of Dave Korner, he was, aside from family, the longest-lasting close relationship in my life that I never really drifted away from, although there is guilt because I hadn't talked with him in a while, made worse because I had just asked for his number a few weeks ago and hadn't called. We didn't talk much in recent years, but until recent months, we exchanged e-mails and I heard from him after every show he booked. In his early 70s, after the show, he did what he had done when he was 16, sent the results to the web site he considered the one of record. According to Simmons, while his body and health were bad, his mind never lost a beat.

For me, in writing this, it is among the most difficult things to write, and it almost comes back full circle, since the very first article on someone's death that I wrote about in such detail was on Brody. That article ended up being the catalyst to so many different things.

If there's a lesson in all this, if you know someone who has changed your life and had a great positive impact, call them or write them, and tell them this week.

ST. LOUIS WRESTLING HIGHLIGHTS 70-83

A look at the biggest shows in St. Louis 1970-83 from Larry Matysik's "Glory Days: The St. Louis Record Book"

1/9/70: NWA champion Dory Funk Jr. def. Dick the Bruiser via DQ (Bruiser was suspended for hitting Funk Jr. with a chair and punching a referee - sellout)
 2/20/70: NWA champion Dory Funk Jr. def. Von Raschke with Whipper Billy Watson as referee - sellout
 4/3/70: NWA champion Dory Funk Jr. def. Pat O'Connor winning the only fall in 60 minutes - sellout
 4/17/70: Gene Kiniski def. Pat O'Connor via count out - sellout
 8/21/70: Pat O'Connor def. Killer Kowalski in a Texas death match - sellout
 10/2/70: NWA champion Dory Funk Jr. def. Dick the Bruiser via spinning toe hold in third fall - 12,051 at the arena
 11/20/70: NWA champion Dory Funk Jr. def. Crimson Knight (unmasked as Big Bill Miller) - 12,515 at the arena
 1/1/71: NWA champion Dory Funk Jr. drew Jack Brisco in 60:00 - sellout
 3/5/71: Blackjack Lanza def. Jack Brisco - sellout
 4/2/71: NWA champion Dory Funk Jr. def. Blackjack Lanza- 11,033 at the arena
 6/18/71: NWA champion Dory Funk Jr. def. Johnny Valentine - sellout
 11/5/71: Dick the Bruiser def. Blackjack Lanza & Bobby Heenan in a handicap match - sellout
 11/19/71: NWA champion Dory Funk Jr. def. Jack Brisco winning the only fall before going 60:00 - 12,614 at the arena
 1/1/72: NWA champion Dory Funk Jr. def. Rufus Jones - sellout
 10/13/72: NWA champion Dory Funk Jr. def. Gene Kiniski -sellout
 1/5/73: NWA champion Dory Funk Jr. def. Harley Race via count out - sellout
 1/19/73: Johnny Valentine def. Harley Race to win Missouri State title - sellout
 2/2/73: NWA champion Dory Funk Jr. def. Johnny Valentine - sellout
 6/15/73: NWA champion Harley Race drew Bruno Sammartino 60:00 with Lou Thesz as referee - This didn't sellout but did draw 10,043 fans, very close to capacity
 4/5/74: Battle Royal plus Harley Race def. Pat O'Connor Texas death match - sellout
 6/14/74: NWA champion Jack Brisco drew Dory Funk Jr. 60:00 - 10,669 near sellout
 1/3/75: NWA champion Jack Brisco def. Dick the Bruiser via DQ - sellout
 2/7/75 - NWA champion Jack Brisco def. Dory Funk Jr. In a no time limit match with Joe Higuchi as referee - 10,087
 3/21/75: Battle Royal with Andre the Giant plus Johnny Valentine def. Harley Race Texas death match - sellout
 1/2/76: NWA champion Terry Funk def. Pat O'Connor - 10,290
 2/18/78: NWA champion Harley Race drew Rocky Johnson - 10,052
 8/11/78: NWA champion Harley Race double count out Dick the Bruiser - sellout
 11/24/78: NWA champion Harley Race def. Ted DiBiase - 10,500
 2/3/79: Ric Flair & Dick Murdoch def. Andre the Giant & Rocky Johnson - sellout
 6/15/79: NWA champion Harley Race def. David Von Erich - sellout
 9/14/79: Battle Royal plus Andre the Giant def. Bruiser Brody via DQ - sellout
 1/4/80: NWA champion Harley Race drew David Von Erich over 60:00 - sellout
 1/25/80: Bruiser Brody & Dick Murdoch def. Andre the Giant & Dick the Bruiser - sellout
 3/28/80: NWA champion Harley Race double count out Ric Flair - sellout
 8/8/80 - NWA champion Harley Race def. Ken Patera - 10,420
 9/12/80: Dick the Bruiser def. Dick Murdoch cage mach - 10,799
 10/3/80: NWA champion Harley Race def. David Von Erich - 15,464 at the arena
 1/23/81: Andre the Giant & Bruiser Brody def. Ric Flair & Dick Murdoch - sellout
 3/20/81: NWA champion Harley Race def. Dick the Bruiser - 10,822
 6/12/81: NWA champion Harley Race def. Ted DiBiase - 16,088 at the arena
 8/17/81: NWA champion Dusty Rhodes def. Ric Flair - 10,414
 9/11/81: Harley Race def. Kerry Von Erich - sellout
 10/2/81: NWA champion Ric Flair drew Harley Race 60:00 - 18,055 sellout at the arena
 1/1/82: NWA champion Ric Flair def. Dusty Rhodes - 19,819 sellout at the arena
 2/19/82: Andre the Giant & Terry Funk no contest Harley Race & Jerry Blackwell plus Battle Royal - sellout

3/26/82: NWA champion Ric Flair def. Dick the Bruiser - 10,272
6/12/82: NWA champion Ric Flair def. Dick the Bruiser - 19,027 sellout at the arena
10/8/82: Harley Race def. NWA champion Ric Flair by winning the only fall in 60:00 but didn't get the title because he didn't win a second fall - 17,002 at the arena
1/1/83: NWA champion Ric Flair def. Butch Reed by winning the only fall in 60:00 - sellout
2/11/83: NWA champion Ric Flair drew Bruiser Brody - 16,695 at the arena

MARCH 30, 2020

I never knew this but the first TV studio wrestling show in the U.S. was taped on December 18, 1942 at WRBG Studios in Schenectady, NY. It was also the first pro wrestling television show, although almost nobody had TVs at the time. Wrestling first got popular on U.S. television in 1947 out of Los Angeles with Gorgeous George, and some have listed George's network TV debut as one of the biggest moments in U.S. television history. As far as television goes, from probably 1947 to 1953 or so, pro wrestling was the most mainstream it has ever been in the U.S. George and Milton Berle were the top television stars of the first TV era and wrestling was top ten in the network ratings for a few years. Wrestling and Roller Derby were huge TV hits, and then overexposed and the ratings dropped and the networks lost interest in both. By the late 50s, wrestling struggled in many parts of the country and rebounded in the 60s with the advent of UHF stations, which had lower ratings expectations for programming and wrestling grew in the 60s and had a peak in the early 70s. While not universal, most of the country was hot in the early 70s and fell off in the late 70s. If I were to go with territory peaks, Southern California was strong in the early-to-mid 60s and had a hot period 1970-72. San Francisco was strong from 1961 to 1976, peaking in the early 60s with Ray Stevens and staying strong until the departure of Pat Patterson. Oregon flourished with Lonnie Mayne in the late 60s, and had a second peak in the late 70s and early 80s with Buddy Rose and Roddy Piper. Seattle and Vancouver peaked in the 60s. The AWA's first peak was around 1968 to 1975 behind The Crusher, Superstar Billy Graham and the tag team of Ray Stevens & Nick Bockwinkel, and had a bigger second peak 1981-83 behind Hulk Hogan, Bockwinkel, Jerry Blackwell, Adrian Adonis & Jesse Ventura and The High Flyers. Texas had the big overall peak 1969-72 during the heyday of Fritz Von Erich, Johnny Valentine and Wahoo McDaniel and the more talked about peak of 1983-84 behind the Freebirds and second generation Von Erichs. The old Mid South peak was 1980-85 behind JYD, and later Jim Duggan, The Rock & Roll Express and others. Memphis' actual peak was probably 1972-75 behind Jackie Fargo and later Jerry Lawler. There was a second peak in 1982-85 with Lawler and The Fabulous Ones. Georgia's peak would be during the 70s when the Omni opened behind Dusty Rhodes, Mr. Wrestling & Mr. Wrestling II. Florida's peak would be 1970-76 with Jack Brisco and Dory Funk Jr., and later Dusty Rhodes. The Carolinas had 1976-83 behind Ric Flair, Paul Jones, Blackjack Mulligan, Wahoo McDaniel, The Andersons and a second peak in 85-86 with Rhodes, Magnum T.A., The Four Horsemen, Road Warriors, and Midnight and Rock & Roll Express. The overall WWWF territorial peak would have been 1975-81 behind Bruno Sammartino, Billy Graham and Bob Backlund and 1982-83 with the emergence of Jimmy Snuka, before the Hulk Hogan era going national (1984-90) and Steve Austin/Rock era (1998-2001). Toronto's peak was 1970-74

under The Sheik, and then later for Flair and then Hogan. Montreal's peak was the late 50s with Edouard Carpentier and Killer Kowalski then 1967-74 with Jacques & Johnny Rougeau and Carpentier, and then the International (Rougeaus, Sheik and Abdullah the Butcher) vs. Grand Prix (Jean Ferre/Andre, Don Leo Jonathan, the Vachons, LeDucs and Killer Kowalski). My guess is Stampede's peak was in the 50s. Vancouver was in the 60s with Gene Kiniski and Jonathan. Michigan and Ohio was late 60s and early 70s with The Sheik, Bobo Brazil and Pampero Firpo. Cleveland and Buffalo was late 50s and early 60s with Kiniski and Fritz Von Erich.